

HIS
PLAN
OUR
PURPOSE

IS THERE MORE?

Understanding the Storyline of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation

THE STORY OF **PURPOSE**

TEACHER GUIDE

28
nineteen[™]

THE WHOLE STORY

Warren Wiersbe writes, “When He wrote the Bible, God didn’t give us a ponderous theology book divided into sections labeled God, Creation, Man, Sin, and so forth. Instead, He gave us a story, a narrative that begins in eternity past and ends in eternity future.”



THE STORY OF **GRACE**

> *January*



THE STORY OF **DELIVERANCE**

> *February*



THE STORY OF **PROMISE**

> *March*



THE STORY OF **FAITH**

> *April*



THE STORY OF **RENEWAL**

> *May*

FEATURED



THE STORY OF **PURPOSE**

> *June, July + August*



THE STORY OF **CHRIST: IN HIS OWN WORDS**

> *August + September*



THE STORY OF **POWER**

> *October*



THE STORY OF **CHANGE**

> *November*



THE STORY OF **HEAVEN**

> *December*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE STORY OF PURPOSE > 5



- 7 **Purpose** of Wisdom > *Proverbs 1*
June 6/7
- 15 **Purpose** of Work > *Ecclesiastes 9*
June 13/14
- 21 **Purpose** of the Home > *Proverbs 24, 31*
June 20/21
- 27 **Purpose** of Words > *Proverbs 18*
June 27/28
- 33 **Purpose** of Freedom > *Psalms 119:1-56*
July 4/5
- 39 **Purpose** of God's Ways > *Proverbs 14*
July 11/12
- 45 **Purpose** of Community > *Ecclesiastes 4*
July 18/19
- 53 **Purpose** of Praise > *Psalms 9*
July 25/26
- 61 **Purpose** of the Valley > *Psalms 42*
August 1/2
- 69 **Purpose** of the Heart > *Ecclesiastes 3*
August 8/9



THERE IS NOTHING THAT
HAPPENS ON THIS EARTH AND
IN OUR LIVES THAT COMES AS
A SURPRISE TO GOD.

THE STORY OF PURPOSE

This year we have been asking the overall question, “Is there more?” And now that we are midway into the year, the question is just as relevant. The series we are embarking upon this summer is perhaps the timeliest of all. It does not matter what stage of life you are in, or circumstances you are facing; everyone wants to have purpose.

For the next 10 weeks we will be looking at the Story of Purpose as it pertains to life. The dictionary defines purpose as both a noun and a verb. The noun definition is **the reason something exists or is done, made or used**. The verb definition is **to set as an aim, intention, or goal for oneself**.¹ Whether you are looking for the reason something exists or its aim or intention, we all are looking for purpose.

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived realized the value of purpose. In Ecclesiastes 3, he begins the chapter with this verse:

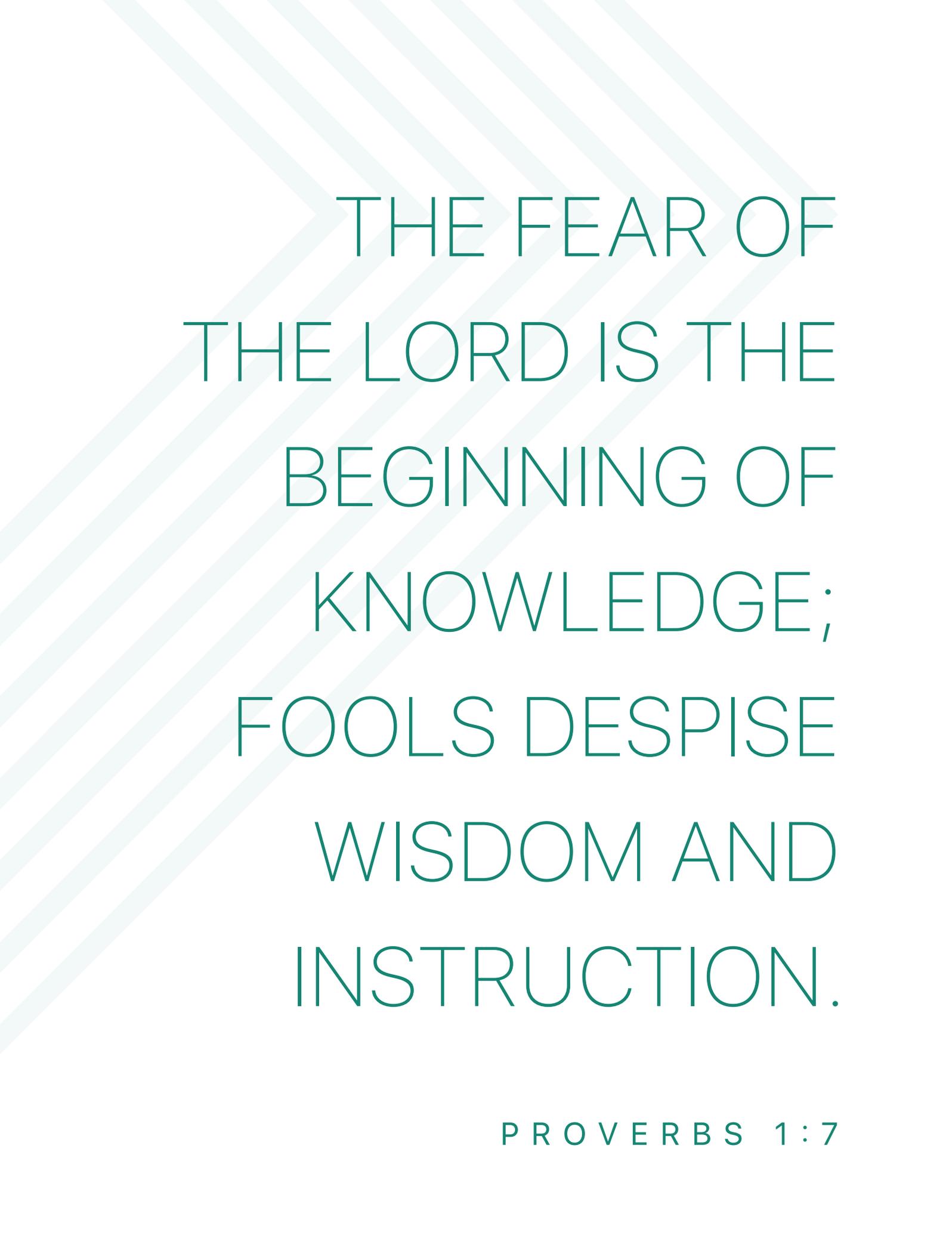
ECCLESIASTES 3:1 *To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven. (NKJV)*

This one verse sums up the importance and significance of purpose. Everything under heaven, that which we experience on this earth, has purpose. There is nothing that happens on this earth and in our lives that comes as a surprise to God. There is a season, a time and a purpose for all things. After Solomon states this thesis, he proceeds to list 14 opposites. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to weep and a time to laugh, among others. These 14 opposites are known as extremes, yet in between the extremes is something called life. It is in between the extremes that we find purpose for everything under heaven.

There is a purpose for family and work. There is a purpose for words and community. In God’s sovereignty, He knew that we would experience the inevitable extremes. But God also knew that we would have choices to make amid them. Over the next 10 weeks, we will seek the wisdom of God by looking at passages from the wisdom books of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

| | |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|
| Jun 6/7 | Purpose of Wisdom - Proverbs 1 |
| Jun 13/14 | Purpose of Work - Ecclesiastes 9 |
| Jun 20/21 | Purpose of the Home - Proverbs 24, 31 |
| Jun 27/28 | Purpose of Words - Proverbs 18 |
| Jul 4/5 | Purpose of Freedom - Psalm 119:1-56 |
| Jul 11/12 | Purpose of God’s Ways - Proverbs 14 |
| Jul 18/19 | Purpose of Community - Ecclesiastes 4 |
| Jul 25/26 | Purpose of Praise - Psalm 9 |
| Aug 1/2 | Purpose of the Valley - Psalm 42 |
| Aug 8/9 | Purpose of the Heart - Ecclesiastes 3 |

¹ Dictionary.com



THE FEAR OF
THE LORD IS THE
BEGINNING OF
KNOWLEDGE;
FOOLS DESPISE
WISDOM AND
INSTRUCTION.

PROVERBS 1:7

PURPOSE

OF WISDOM

DATE

June 6 & 7

WEEK

1 of 10

OVERVIEW

Proverbs 1

KEY VERSE

Proverbs 1:7

SETTING THE STAGE

The book of Proverbs was written largely by King Solomon, considered the wisest man to have ever lived. The fame of his wisdom extended well beyond the territory of Israel. And, since the printing press, the Internet and podcasts did not exist back then, many kings and queens from nations across the world came to Jerusalem to hear his other-worldly wisdom.

Why is it important to possess wisdom? And why does it seem so elusive to find and difficult to acquire, even for the most powerful and connected? While there are many definitions for wisdom, it is generally viewed as the 'X factor' allowing one 'to win' at life.¹ People want to know the best decision to make and the best course to take in any given situation. If they only possessed wise foresight, knowledge, and discretion, surely it would transform the course of their lives and positively affect their destinations.

The book of Proverbs speaks specifically to the topic of wisdom; namely, what it is, where it comes from, and how to get it. As we will see, wisdom is not deliberately elusive or purposefully problematic like it might appear. To the child of God, true wisdom is available and accessible through Jesus Christ. Wisdom is learned and utilized throughout a lifetime. To this topic, we now turn to Proverbs 1.

Continued on page 8 >

LESSON OUTLINE

1. How We Perceive Wisdom
2. How We Receive Wisdom
3. How God Gives Wisdom

THINGS TO KNOW

- Wisdom is not just a matter of the head (intuition, intellect, or experience), but also a matter of the heart (authority, love, and affection).
- Wisdom is accessible to all people.

PURPOSE

OF WISDOM

Setting the Stage, continued >

PROVERBS 1:1-7 *The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: ²To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, ³to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; ⁴to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—⁵Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, ⁶to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. ⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Introduction

How can a person gain wisdom and grow wise? Before we can know how to gain wisdom, we must first know what wisdom is, so that we can discern between true wisdom and false wisdom.

When considering wisdom today, people might think of television talk show segments or news platforms, such as “Oprah” or “Dr. Phil” or “Washington Post” or “Fox News” or “Judge Judy” or “Harvard Review.”

Or, they might think of the great philosophers in human history: Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle. You know, the famous Greek virtuosos who now have their marble busts in every public library, looking up into the sky with a wincing look in their eyes, pensively pondering the complexities of life.

Or, maybe when thinking of wisdom, you think of those ‘one-liners’ that your grandpa would say in a warm voice from his big, leather, comfy chair that would always endearingly hit you and gently challenge you to think in a way you would not have considered on your own.

Biblical commentators and scholars believe that the simplest definition of ‘wisdom’ is “the ability to see things from God’s perspective,”² and “competence in seeing the realities of life.”³

Generally speaking, most people might perceive ‘wisdom’ as being really smart and having a high IQ; and not just smart in the sense of being ‘book smart.’ Rather, the type of smart that bears upon real-life situations in meaningful ways.

That seems like a fair definition of ‘wisdom.’ It is certainly not less than that; but there is more to it, as well. What does this passage communicate about the nature of true wisdom, and more importantly, how we can gain true wisdom?

1. HOW WE PERCEIVE WISDOM

Biblical commentators and scholars believe that the simplest definition of ‘wisdom’ is “the ability to see things from God’s perspective,”² and “competence in seeing the realities of life.”³

¹ Daniel L. Akin, and Jonathan Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Proverbs* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2017). iBooks p. 21.

² Chuck Swindoll, *Solomon*.

³ Timothy Keller, *Pointers to Christ – Directional Signs in History*. “A King’s Wisdom – Solomon.” October 5th, 1997.



Those two definitions might sound dissimilar at first, but they are virtually synonymous. For instance, if you can see things from God’s perspective, then you will have competence in seeing the realities of life as they truly are.

Biblical scholars arrived at this definition for wisdom in Proverbs, as relayed by King Solomon, by mainly pivoting back to the original place Solomon first gained wisdom from God, which takes place in 1 Kings 3. This chapter recounts a scene where God approaches Solomon as a young boy, as he becomes king, and promises to grant him whatever he might wish. And Solomon, humbly and admirably, asks that God would give him wisdom of all things so that he could steward well his leadership of God’s people.

1 KINGS 3:9 Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people? (ESV)

This passage shines a light on the otherwise blurry contours of ‘wisdom’ and what it looks like. Scholars argue that the phrase, *give your servant an understanding mind* should more appropriately be rendered as, “give your servant a **hearing** or **perceiving** heart.” In other words, he is asking, “God, help me to perceive things like you perceive them.”

That sounds nice, but how do you do that? How can that happen, practically?

Interestingly, the most common word that Solomon uses for wisdom throughout all the books he wrote in the Bible is a Hebrew word that communicates the concept of “coming under the authority of.”⁴ It is the Hebrew word, ‘Chokmah.’

Whenever Solomon is referring to wisdom, he is not primarily invoking the idea of knowledge. He is primarily invoking the notion of authority instead.

Solomon is saying that wisdom is, at its very root, not an issue of intellectual capacity, but personal authority. He is saying, “Whatever your authority is, whatever your king is, that will be the source of your wisdom.” Types of wisdom come from types of authority. And your wisdom will always flow from the source of your authority.

Solomon is saying that wisdom is, at its very root, not an issue of intellectual capacity, but personal authority.

Therefore, before we even get into a conversation of ‘what wisdom is’ and ‘where we can find it,’ we must consider the following question first: **who / what is your king?**

Who is the main authority in your life? Who makes the decisions about ultimate questions? What voice is your standard? What do you value as a premium and ultimate? To what are you yoked? What do you feel like you cannot live without? Whatever that is—that is the real authority in your life, and it will guide you and give you wisdom about what you should or should not do.⁵

Solomon, wisely, is saying that there are many types of wisdom out there, precisely because you can give yourself to many different types of authority. From where do you perceive wisdom? The kind of wisdom you receive will come from the authority you crown king.

Let us make this practical. Is romance your king? If so, then all the decisions and actions you take in life will ultimately be done in the best interest of romance. Are money and financial security your king? If so, then your guiding principles will ultimately lead every decision to your financial

⁴ J.D. Greear, *Solomon: The Man Who Had It All*, “Ask Me Anything.” 2017.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Pointers to Christ – Directional Signs in History* “A King’s Wisdom – Solomon.” October 5th, 1997.

bottom line. Is approval your king? If so, then that authority will, like a current, influence the direction of every decision toward perceived status and approval.

Ultimately, Solomon is saying that wisdom and authority are inextricably connected. And, he is saying if you want true wisdom about perceiving reality as God sees it, and competency in seeing the realities of life, that can only come through knowing the true King.

2. HOW WE RECEIVE WISDOM

If we have determined that wisdom is ultimately a function of ‘coming under the authority of’ and perceiving life through the lens of that authority, then how can we access the true wisdom of God? How can we practically bring ourselves under the authority of God, the true King, and therefore, receive true wisdom?

We see this in Proverbs 1:7.

PROVERBS 1:7 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

We receive wisdom by making the LORD our King, which is expressed by a fear of Him. What does the Bible mean by ‘fear’? It does not mean our relationship with God should be characterized by a constant state of ‘spiritual fright.’ The ‘fear of God’ communicates a reverence regarding His great power and holiness and appropriate awe towards His abundant mercy and goodness.

When we begin to see God rightly, then we will begin to see ourselves in light of who God is, and it will begin to produce a godly fear—reverential awe—inside of us. And when God is our King, *the fear of the Lord [will be] the beginning of knowledge.*

This framework fits how we defined wisdom — ‘the ability to see things like God sees them’ and ‘competently seeing the realities of life.’ If we are going to start seeing rightly, we must start with seeing God for who He is, and then, seeing ourselves rightly in light of God. If we do not get that straight first, then it will be impossible to find true wisdom apart from the only source of true wisdom.

Wisdom is received, therefore, by humbling yourself before the Lord. Humility finally makes wisdom accessible because you are starting to see things as they really are.⁶

In the latter half of Proverbs 1, God offers wisdom to all people. He is not partial at all, but only some will receive it. To whom is it given? To kings? To smart people? To teachers? To leaders? No, it is to those who know they need it, i.e., the humble of heart.

This is why the Pharisees and religious leaders in the Bible never got wisdom—even though they were literally the smartest of all! They had the best education and training. They knew the laws and the prophets of the Old Testament. Their self-righteousness and their self-sufficiency made them dull and blind. They were not humble of heart. They did not need God.

And yet, as Jesus says in the Gospels, the Kingdom of God is revealed to ‘little children’ which is part of receiving wisdom.

Wisdom is received, therefore, by humbling yourself before the Lord. Humility finally makes wisdom accessible because you are starting to see things as they really are.⁶

⁶ Jason Fritz, Illuminate Community Church, Solomon – Finding The Source of Wisdom. October 17, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rJoEF5v-bk>.

MATTHEW 18:3 *“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (ESV)*

Jesus is simply communicating that wisdom ultimately comes by approaching God humbly—like a child who depends entirely on the Father—desperately relying upon the power and goodness of God.

Note the many references in Proverbs 1 where Solomon frames the conversation of gaining wisdom in a relational context, namely, that of spiritually posturing ourselves in a position like that of a child:

PROVERBS 1:8 *Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching.*

PROVERBS 1:10 *My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.*

PROVERBS 1:15 *My son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths.*

Why does Solomon refer to the reader as a child? Perhaps it is because he knew one overarching truth: namely, if our posture was not with a childlike heart first, then nothing else we heard after that would stick. Even the most valuable nuggets of wisdom would fall to the wayside without a second consideration.

Humility, seeing God rightly and ourselves rightly teaches us to depend on God like a child upon a loving father. Apart from that posture, true wisdom will be impossible. But with a posture of humility, godly wisdom will surely come.

How, then, does God give wisdom to those who are humbled and ready to receive it?

3. HOW GOD GIVES WISDOM

To understand how God grants wisdom to His people, it is important to note two truths that we must hold in tension with one another. The first is that God desires to make us wise. And the second is that God makes us wise by putting us into situations where we are forced to exercise the muscle of dependency upon His wisdom and counsel.

A. God desires to make us wise.

God desires to make us wise because He desires for all of us to be conformed increasingly into the likeness of His Son, who Himself is the wisdom of God (*Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 1:24*). And while many texts speak to this truth, *Proverbs 1* is particularly clear:

PROVERBS 1:20-23 *Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; ²¹at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ²²“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? ²³If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you.”*

From what we can see, God is not playing hide-and-seek with us, as we might otherwise think or imagine when it comes to wisdom.

From what we can see, God is not playing hide-and-seek with us, as we might otherwise think or imagine when it comes to wisdom. God desperately desires us to be wise in His Word and wise in His world. The following verses show that God does not make wisdom available to us in a secretive, enigmatic manner where only the smartest will discover it or the most moral will receive it. No, rather, He is announcing wisdom to all of us in a loud, unabashed way. If only we would humbly depend upon Him and simply ask!

JAMES 1:5 *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” (ESV)*

It seems simple, right? To be sure, the act of ‘simply’ giving ourselves to God might appear easy initially, but we can all attest that this is undoubtedly the most difficult activity of the human condition. Only when we reflect on the Gospel will our hearts be softened and turn to Him in repentance (*Romans 2:4*). And once we humble ourselves before God, we finally position ourselves so that we might be able to receive His wisdom.

B. God will make us wise through dependence.

Whenever we ask or pray for God to give us something, I think we are all guilty of thinking that the process is similar to how we would ask for anything else in life. Especially in our Western culture—we ask for it, and it is given to us. For example, we ask for an ice cream cone at an ice cream parlor, and we are given an ice cream cone. Easy as that. Likewise, it is easy to think that by asking God for wisdom, God will simply drop ‘wisdom’ into our brain much like He would drop a ‘Wisdom PDF file’ into the ‘Dropbox’ of our head. Bam! That was easy!

To be sure, we do know that we are supposed to pray for wisdom. And the good news is that God will answer this prayer. God promises that when we ask anything according to His will, He will hear us and answer us (*1 John 5:14*). And since it is His will to make us more like Jesus, we can therefore conclude that God will always answer that prayer (*Romans 8:29*).

However, this does not mean God will always answer that prayer in the way we think He should or will. In fact, God usually answers much differently than we expect. Oftentimes, God’s answers to prayer are wrapped differently than we imagine, given on terms we did not think we agreed to, and delivered on a timetable we might not prefer.

And this is certainly the case with wisdom. In the Bible, God gives wisdom not through an easy, instantaneous process, but through the mechanism of trial, suffering, and sacrifice. The verses immediately before James 1:5 make this point:

JAMES 1:2-4 *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (ESV)*

In other words, God will often make us wise through difficulties that force us to think deeply, critically, and holistically in a way that otherwise would have been impossible without the trial.

In other words, God will often make us wise through difficulties that force us to think deeply, critically, and holistically in a way that otherwise would have been impossible without the trial. And as such, the rest of Proverbs teems with sayings related to conflict and resolution—with friends, with money, with leadership, with family, with governance, with work, with sleep, with speech, with purity, and with virtually everything in life.

God makes us wise, sanctifying us more into the likeness of His Son, not through an easy life without trial, but through the sufferings that make us stout in the things of God, ‘*lacking in nothing*’ (*James 1:4*).

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The book of Proverbs concerns true wisdom, which is the fear of the Lord, allowing His ultimate authority to inform and transform every aspect of our life. Wisdom is not merely intellectual knowledge; it is a conviction of God's Truth that bears upon all of our thinking, living, and doing.

Only Christianity suggests that wisdom is a beautiful gift of grace through faith. It is not earned by merits or smarts so that no one may boast. It is a gift of God. The Gospel makes true wisdom from the true King accessible to all, precisely because God's mercy in Jesus Christ is available to all. And this true wisdom will make us more like the King from which we behold:

JAMES 3:17-18 *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

Notice that true wisdom, from the true King, bears meaningfully upon real life. It leads to a life of flourishing that creates flourishing for many others as well. May we perceive of true wisdom correctly, ready ourselves to receive it appropriately, and humbly ask the true King to give it. But let us not be surprised if God answers this prayer by giving us difficulty and trial. In some cases, the path of wisdom might be the only way, as was salvation through the cross. But by His grace, He will give us everything we need for life and godliness along the way (2 Peter 1:3).

WHATEVER YOUR
HAND FINDS TO DO,
DO IT WITH ALL YOUR
MIGHT, FOR THERE IS
NO WORK OR THOUGHT
OR KNOWLEDGE OR
WISDOM IN SHEOL, TO
WHICH YOU ARE GOING.

ECCLESIASTES 9:10

PURPOSE

OF WORK

DATE

June 13 & 14

WEEK

2 of 10

OVERVIEW

Ecclesiastes 9

KEY VERSE

Ecclesiastes 9:10

SETTING THE STAGE

Three books of the Bible are formally considered ‘Wisdom Literature’ by genre: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Psalms and Song of Solomon are often included in this genre as well. Interestingly, the books are composed differently from one another in terms of their structure and style. But each book communicates a clear message about how we ought to think about life. Namely, that life is complex: it does not always function in neat, tidy, or categorical ways that we so often think it should. And therefore, the answers and explanations, or wisdom the Bible provides are not so readily apparent, neat, tidy, or categorical either.

The book of Ecclesiastes weaves two main theological ideas throughout the entire book, the word “futility” and the phrase “under the sun.” The word “futility” is mentioned 38 times, and the phrase “under the sun” is mentioned 29 times, in only 12 chapters. And these two ideas set the framework for a key message of the book, the nature of work.

First, the Hebrew word used for “futility” is the term, ‘Hevel,’ which essentially conveys the notion of nothingness. It refers to the idea of something that has the appearance of substance, but when pressed, it reveals itself to be empty. And second, the phrase ‘under the sun’ communicates a view of life without the larger perspective of God and eternity, expressing a perspective of the material world only. If ‘under the sun’ is simply the earth, then ‘over the sun’ would be all of life under heaven’s perspective. *Continued on page 16 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Design of Work
2. The Dignity of Work
3. The Delight of Work

THINGS TO KNOW

- Work was instituted before the Fall of Mankind; therefore, work is God’s gift to us and our gift to one another.
- Your worth is not connected to your work.
- God has made us both agents (capacity for work) and regents (responsibility in work) in the working order.

PURPOSE OF WORK

Setting the Stage, continued >

Within this framework, Ecclesiastes speaks of the topic of work frequently. The book recognizes that our work is often subjected to and frustrated by the dual ideas of ‘futility’ and ‘under the sun.’ So, where is the hope for our vocations and aspirations? Well, it might just be uncovered in the very definition of ‘vocation.’

We get the English word ‘vocation’ from the Latin word ‘vocare,’ which means ‘to call.’ In our American culture, the term ‘vocation’ usually refers to the job one holds. But the original sense of the term communicates a different idea entirely. It conveys the notion of ‘calling,’ which means your work did not originate from you or for you, but for someone else; and, it concerns a mission or service beyond yourself.¹

Here lies the biblical wisdom for how we are to understand work, and how our work can be redeemed from a life ‘under the sun’ where everything is inescapably ‘futile.’ While many passages address this topic, Ecclesiastes 9:10 provides three guiding principles for understanding a type of work ‘under heaven.’ They are the design of the work, the dignity of work, and the delight of work.

ECCLESIASTES 9:10 *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.*

1. THE DESIGN OF WORK

In the first part of the verse, we read that the author implores us to approach work with the following framework: *Whatever your hand finds to do...* What does this mean exactly? A couple of different truths can be seen in this phrase regarding the design of work.

First, it means that we are designed to work. God created us in His image, and since He is a creative and working God who created everything, this means that we too are creative beings, designed to create and to work as well. Thus, the capacity for and the ability to work is simply part of our DNA. The faculties to create and to work are part of what it means to be human, made in the image of a working and creative God.

When God created humanity, His very first command to Adam was to work the creative order, to develop it, and to have dominion over it (*Genesis 1:26*). Genesis says, “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*” (*Genesis 2:25, ESV*) Notice, this was before God created Eve, a suitable helper to Adam, and it was also before the Fall of Mankind. Before Eve entered the picture before marriage or family came about, and before sin tore through reality, man was working. Adam was tilling the ground, managing the garden, naming the animals, and creating systems

The faculties to create and to work are part of what it means to be human, made in the image of a working and creative God.



¹ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Our Work To God's Work*. (Penguin Group, 2012), iBooks p. 18.

and structures that would best steward the good creation that God had placed under the earthly dominion of Adam. Overall, we were designed to work, and in doing so, practically demonstrate the image of God on earth.

In verse 10, the word ‘hand’ simply represents our capacity to work, our individuality, and our agency. And the phrase ‘finds to do’ refers to the idea that there is always something that you can do to contribute to the flourishing and development of this world. So, when the author says, “*Whatever your hand finds to do,*” he is making the clear assumption that it is within our design to, at least, do something.

Secondly, this verse also alludes to the idea that we, by our design, gravitate towards a specific type of work. God not only created us with the capacity to work in general, He also created us to complete certain types of work in particular. God has designed us such that we each have different skill sets, predispositions, and personalities. This means God did not create us all the same. We do not all have the same serial number. Rather, God gave us differences that we can utilize to specialize in certain work.

This means that God did not design everyone to be a teacher or a preacher. God did not design everyone to be a car mechanic or a counselor. Rather, God designed people to be lawyers, IT technicians, financial analysts, geologists, dentists, and writers. For humanity to truly have dominion over all of creation, God endowed different types of people with the unique ability to govern over, serve in, and contribute to virtually every area of life.

For humanity to truly have dominion over all of creation, God endowed different types of people with the unique ability to govern over, serve in, and contribute to virtually every area of life.

When the verse says, “*Whatever your hand finds to do,*” it is referring to the idea that each one of us gravitates towards an area of work that we are particularly equipped to accomplish. We each have God-given strengths, skills, leanings, passions, and spiritual gifts that naturally lead us into one ‘profession’ or ‘vocation’ or ‘work’ over another.

Everyone has struggled (at least at some point in their life) with the question, “What is God’s will for my life?” or “What is my personal calling?” We all want to figure out what our role and contribution ought to be in our short time on earth.

It has been said that we can find our ‘purpose’ or our ideal role of work at the intersection of 3 main things: our abilities, our affinities, and the affirmations of others. Your abilities ultimately refer to your God-given strengths, giftings, personality, and skill set. Your affinities most nearly refer to what kind of work interests you the most and brings you the most amount of energy and enjoyment. And the affirmation of others simply means that other people can testify whether some perceived skill of yours is an actual, substantial strength. All three of these principles, working together, can help draw out your ‘purpose’ from the otherwise murky waters of personal intuition and experience.

If you could boil down the Great Commission into a statement about work, it might be something like this quote that I heard at a conference in college: “Do what you do best for the glory of God, and do it in a place that is most strategic for the mission of God.”² When we look deeply at how God has specifically designed us—our abilities, affinities, and affirmations—we can begin to strategically position ourselves for the greatest impact for His Kingdom. When we follow God’s design, our work will not only become more personally enriching, but it will also enable us to be Gospel witnesses and workplace examples of our excellent and creative God.

² *Work and Worship* Conference, The Summit Church, Durham, NC.

Overall, the phraseology of “*Whatever your hand finds to do,*” functions like a blueprint of sorts, revealing how we ought to evaluate ourselves and locate our particular purpose so that we can enjoy work, serve others well, and contribute to the Kingdom of God.

2. THE DIGNITY OF WORK

In the second part of the verse, the author implores us to approach work with our God-given abilities with the following attitude and ethic: “*do it with your might...*” This means several important things as well, specifically concerning the dignity of work. There are two main truths hidden in this phrase that we need to uncover so that we can work as God would desire us to work.

The first truth in this phrase is that there is value in engaging in our work wholeheartedly. The reason for engaging wholeheartedly is not simply because that is what we ‘ought’ to do. But rather, we should engage wholeheartedly ultimately as a response to the reality that work itself is a gift from God and a dignifying responsibility on its own terms. In this way, we do not approach work with a hanging threat of condemnation, but a gentle exhortation of truth.

Recall Genesis 1, the creation story, where God created everything and called it ‘good;’ then He created mankind and called us ‘very good.’ This means that God’s calling upon those whom He deemed ‘very good’ to manage that which He deemed ‘good’ that **all work**—the interaction between the regents and the raw material—is, therefore, a categorically high and noble honor. Work is a way that we image forth the very character and activity of God Himself.

Work is a way that we image forth the very character and activity of God Himself.

Seen in this light, work becomes more than a mere duty, although it is that. It also becomes a privilege. The only right response to the reality of work, and serving God in our work, is to expend our might and to give our best, which is an act of worship.

Work, then, becomes primarily a response of stewardship and faithfulness. However, when work becomes something different than a responsibility of stewardship and faithfulness, it decays and maligns everything else in its path. This leads to the second truth that we can glean from the phrase, “*do it with your might.*”

The second truth is that our work should be done for the sake of work itself. In other words, the nature and purpose of work ought to be done for the work itself, not for the primary purpose or means of accomplishing something else. What do I mean here?

Notice the text says, “*do it with your might.*” Notice the author does not say, “do it to establish your significance and importance as an individual;” nor does it say, “do it for the express purpose of securing financial stability;” nor does it say, “do it so that you can win the approval of other people.” A biblical view on work does not view work, any work at all, even the ‘work’ of good deeds, as a means unto something else.

When work becomes a means to an end, we will usually find ourselves bowing at the feet of an idol.

When work becomes a means to an end, we will usually find ourselves bowing at the feet of an idol. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with financial stability, providing for family, or approval from others. However, when we see our work primarily as a means to accomplishing those things, we have ruined the very essence of what makes work beautiful on its own terms.

When I was in college orientation, I remember hearing from 90% of my peers that they wanted to be doctors or lawyers once they graduated. I found this particularly interesting, and yet, a bit problematic. Now, there is certainly nothing wrong with being a doctor or lawyer.

However, 90% of the workforce should not be doctors or lawyers. And, I know for a fact that God did not create 90% of people to serve as doctors and lawyers.

So, why the obsession to be a doctor or lawyer? It is because those two professions in our American society are commonly associated with status, stability, and prosperity. Who would not want those things? And so, becoming a lawyer or doctor becomes the express vocational means to attaining those desirable things. Sadly, many students end up sacrificing their God-given skills and passions on the altar of a profession they do not like or have no skills in, just because they feel like they must do so to attain the ‘good life.’ And the results are damaging. Their God-given skills and passions are left unused to atrophy; they do not enjoy their work, and the quality of the work they offer to others and society at large decreases greatly.

In other words, the design and dignity of work suffers under the pressure of people wanting it to be for them what it was never intended to be for them after all. God’s call is for us to “*do it with your might*” and not with or for anything else. When work is done from any other purpose or motive, it becomes defective itself; it destructs us in the process, and it deteriorates the quality of our work as well.

Jesus understood the dignity and purpose of work in both a practical and spiritual way, in the Gospel of John. *Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work.” (John 4:34)* Regardless of your vocation, there is dignity and purpose when seen in the light of God. It is not about the kind of work you do; there is and should be a redemptive element in doing the work itself with dignity as a Christ follower.

3. THE DELIGHT OF WORK

Lastly, there is a third dimension of the verse that reveals why we should delight in our work. The verse ends by saying, “*for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in [death]....*” What does this mean exactly? The author is providing the framework that undergirds and encloses our work — time.

Time is a limited resource, and we all desire more of it, not less of it, especially when it comes to our work. We wish we had more time in a day to finish that project. We wish we did not have to sleep as much so that we could maximize our productivity. And so, time, and our inherent limitation of it as human beings, frames our capacity for accomplishment and completion. It humbles us, and it sobers us up to realize that we may never get to finish it. Time marks the end of our work, and the end of our lives.

Time is a limited resource, and we all desire more of it, not less of it, especially when it comes to our work.

Renowned author, J.R.R. Tolkien, composed a brief essay entitled, “Leaf by Niggle,” where he tells a fictional story that relates the limitations (and frustrations) that often define the quality and quantity of our work. In his short story, there is man named Niggle who is an artist whose life aspiration is to paint an incredibly beautiful tree mural; however, he is such a perfectionist and such a servant-hearted person that his time set aside for work is either expended on useless details or spent on others’ needs. As a result, he dies without ever finishing his life’s work. Niggle is then carried off to heaven, where he sees something fascinating: his project of a tree mural completed! He is finally able to enjoy it.

Tolkien’s message is that we live in a world plagued by frustrations towards the completion of our goals, aspirations, and work. But, in God’s economy, when our work is done with hearts and hands bent on God’s Kingdom and eternity, our work means something, whether it was completed in this life or not. Without God and eternity (or, as the author puts it, all things ‘under the sun’), our work on earth simply has no meaning or lasting impact. But with God and eternity, even our

smallest efforts, even the ones left unfinished or frustrated by outside forces, matter and carry into eternity. When we take that truth to heart, it ought to engender within us a type of delight underneath all of our endeavors and work projects—even amid frustration and failure.

Pastor and author, Timothy Keller, writes the following:

If this life is all there is, then everything will eventually burn up in the death of the sun and no one will even be around to remember anything that has ever happened. Everyone will be forgotten, nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught. Unless there is God. If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God’s calling, can matter forever. That is what the Christian faith promises. *“In the Lord, your labor is not in vain,” (1 Corinthians 15:58).*³

How can we truly delight in our work? It comes from the assurance that God values us and our work; and in the Lord, our labor will carry into eternity. He infuses our work with meaning and eternal significance in a way that we simply could not on our own. Only the Christian is privileged to enjoy his or her work in this way. And in light of this, we can rejoice.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

God works, and therefore, work on its own terms is a good thing. It is a glorious extension of His attributes. And when God created us in His own image, He made us both agents of work (giving us the capacity for work) and regents of work (entrusting us with the responsibility to work). Work is part of what it means to be human. God has in store a certain design, dignity, and delight for us in the privilege of working.

When we do not work, we simply become less than what God designed us to be. If work according to God’s design is **humanizing**, then not working at all or not working according to God’s design is **dehumanizing**. As Christians, we realize that our work is not our ultimate worth, stability, security, or satisfaction—Christ is. Under this framework ‘under heaven’ our work, becomes redeemed to being what it was always meant to be all along: work.

When we live according to God’s will for work, we will find God’s unique design for work, His special dignity in work, and His particular delight for us to enjoy within work. His plan truly becomes our purpose.

³ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Our Work To God’s Work*. (Penguin Group, 2012), iBooks p. 28.

PURPOSE

OF THE HOME

DATE

June 20 & 21

WEEK

3 of 10

OVERVIEW

Proverbs 24, 31

KEY VERSES

Proverbs 24:3-4

SETTING THE STAGE

Have you ever had the opportunity to build your own home? It can be one of the most exciting, but also stressful, times of your life. The notion of building your own house initially sounds amazing. After all, who would not want a house that is custom-tailored to fit your personal preferences? However, the journey to completion can be daunting. Yes, you get to make all the decisions, but the problem is the number of decisions you will have to make. From the layout of the house, to the floors, to the cabinets and fixtures, to the moldings and closets, plugs and switches, a decision has to be made on every single item in the house. And to make matters more difficult, there are hundreds of options to choose from for each decision. Uncertainty begins to settle in, and stress quickly follows. You want to build the perfect home, but how do you get there?

While not all of us get an opportunity to choose our own brick and mortar, the Bible explains that all of us do get the opportunity to build our own homes. However, this type of building goes far beyond raw materials. Warren Wiersbe explains,

According to Scripture, God established three human institutions in the world: marriage and the home (*Genesis 2:18-25*), human government (*Genesis 9:1-6; Romans 13*), and the local church (*Acts 2*); of the three, the basic institution is the home. As goes the home, so go the church and the nation.¹

Continued on page 22 >

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Wise Men
2. Wise Women
3. Wise Parents

THINGS TO KNOW

- Proverbs 31 speaks to both men and women.
- God designed the home as the centerpiece of civilization.

PURPOSE

OF THE HOME

Setting the Stage, continued >

God designed the home to serve as the centerpiece of civilization. The home is the primary instrument that God uses to build and shape every individual's character and faith. And as adults, we are given the humbling responsibility to choose how we want to build our own homes. But unlike physical home-building, our decisions are not focused on the carpet color or type of countertops. Instead, spiritual home-building is focused on the values and principles that we choose to use as our foundation. And these decisions are far more critical than paint colors, as they shape the hearts of everyone that lives under our roof.

This massive task can leave us feeling like a confused buyer working with a home builder on a construction site. We too want to spiritually build a "perfect" home, but most of us are uncertain of how to do so. Fortunately, our God never leaves us guessing in the dark. Instead, His Word lights our path and guides our decisions (*Psalms 119:105*). Proverbs 24:3-4 explains,

PROVERBS 24:3-4 *By wisdom, a house is built. And by understanding it is established. And by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.*

God tells us that if we want our homes to be filled with the riches of His grace, we must first make sure we are building it with the right material: **wisdom**.

Two weeks ago, we kicked off this summer series, *The Story of Purpose* by looking at wisdom as foundational to our spiritual and practical lives. Today, we are going to look at the book of Proverbs for instruction on how we can **build** healthy homes. It all starts with becoming wise individuals. For purposes of our discussion, home constitutes a family unit whether it be a single person never married, a single parent, a divorced or widowed individual, a married couple without children, a married couple with children, grandparents raising their grandchildren or a multi-generational family all living together. Regardless of what your 'home' looks like, God has a purpose for your home, and it begins with wisdom from above.

Teacher's Note: This lesson will utilize a married couple with children as examples, though each element can be adapted with a single man, single woman, single parent, etc. Please make sure you are all-inclusive in your teaching as you know your audience best. This topic can be especially sensitive to those who are single.

1. WISE MEN

If you have ever studied the book of Proverbs, you know that one of the most famous passages in the book is the 31st chapter. The chapter is primarily focused on the characteristics of God-fearing women that walk in wisdom. And while that is the primary focus of the text, the chapter often



¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Skillfull, God's Guidebook to Wise Living*, David C. Cook, 2009, p. 117-118.

gets overlooked for its practical application to husbands. So, before we turn to the chapter to help us define a wise wife, let us first look at how it defines a wise husband.

A. He CHERISHES her.

PROVERBS 31:10 *An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels.*

A wise husband understands how good he has it. In Genesis 2, God saw that it was not good for man to be alone, so he provided a “suitable helper” (Genesis 2:18). God presented the first bride to the first groom, and Adam was so thrilled that he began singing (Genesis 2:23). Unfortunately, many men fail to see their wives as the God-given gift that they are. Proverbs 18:22 tells us that,

PROVERBS 18:22 *He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.*

This is why a wife’s worth is far above any jewels. Wise husbands not only understand this truth in their minds, but they demonstrate it through their actions. They value their wives more than their man-cave or football game. They cherish wives more than their favorite hobbies or friends. They do not demean their spouse or make them the butt of jokes. Why? They are wise enough to understand their wives’ sacred value. There is nothing wrong with a man placing value in his work, hobbies, or friends, but wise husbands make sure their wives know that they cherish them above everything else.

There is nothing wrong with a man placing value in his work, hobbies, or friends, but wise husbands make sure their wives know that they cherish them above everything else.

B. He TRUSTS her.

PROVERBS 31:11 *The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.*

Wise husbands do not put up walls between themselves and their spouses. They do not keep secrets or selfishly set aside personal resources. They do not micromanage their wives or control them. Why? Because wise husbands trust their wives. They understand that God gave them a divine teammate, not an adversary. Wise husbands trust the heart and character of their spouse, and they forgive when their spouse needs forgiveness. They do not lead their wives in an over-bearing way. Instead, they lead them like Christ. Husbands are called to love their wives like Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25). And just as Christ entrusted the church with the most valuable of resources, the Gospel (Acts 1:8, 2 Corinthians 5:18), wise husbands entrust their wives with all that they have and all that they are.

C. He ENCOURAGES her.

PROVERBS 31:28-29 *Her children rise up and bless her; her husband also, and he praises her, saying: ²⁹ “Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.”*

Far too often men focus on giving the wrong kinds of gifts. Husbands are quick to open their wallets and purchase flowers, clothes, or jewelry. And while wives appreciate all of these things, the ironic thing is the most valuable gift a man could give actually costs him nothing! Most women would tell you that the thing they want most from their husbands are his words of affirmation. Wives want to connect and hear from the heart of their husbands, but unfortunately, communication is often one of the greatest weaknesses for men! And when men do communicate, it can often turn negative or critical. This is why wise husbands intentionally find ways to encourage their wives.

Most women would tell you that the thing they want most from their husbands are his words of affirmation.

Husbands, do you praise your wife? Do you regularly thank her for her grace and kindness and celebrate her contributions to your home? Wise husbands know the value of their words, so they use them to encourage and build up their spouse.

2. WISE WOMEN

A. She **BUILDS** him up.

PROVERBS 31:12 *She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.*

A wise wife understands the immense power that God has given her. Proverbs 14:1 explains that a wife can build up her house or tear it down with her own two hands. This is because God has given wives an incredible amount of influence through their words. A wife's words can speak life into her husband and give him the boldness and courage to accomplish more than he ever dreamed. But likewise, her words can also paralyze her husband, and embed insecurity and shame that cannot be easily shaken. Wise wives understand this truth, so they wield their power well. They "do good" to their husbands. They aim to be the crown of their husband, not cancer in his bones (*Proverbs 12:4*).

B. She **PARTNERS** with him.

PROVERBS 31:13 *She looks for wool and flax and works with her hands in delight.*

The Proverbs 31 woman is depicted as a hard worker! The chapter explains that this kind of woman wakes up early (v. 15), conducts business (v. 16), is a great planner (v. 21), and does excellent work with her hands (v. 22). She is an amazing contributor to the home and serves as the perfect partner to her husband. God recognized deficiencies in Adam so He provided a suitable helper for him (*Genesis 2:18*). Eve was created to partner with Adam, and collectively, work together as one to accomplish God's purposes for their lives. Wise wives understand this calling and pro-actively look for ways to help. Instead of criticizing their husband's weaknesses, wise wives look for opportunities to come alongside him and fill those gaps.

Instead of criticizing their husband's weaknesses, wise wives look for opportunities to come alongside him and fill those gaps.

C. She **TACTFULLY** counsels him.

PROVERBS 31:26 *She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*

No one knows a man better than his wife. Wives can see their husband's strengths, but they can also best identify their weaknesses. As mentioned above, God created wives to help their husbands, and yes, part of that help includes offering him counsel. The key is the counsel has to be tactful in order to become impactful. A Proverbs 31 wife opens her mouth with wisdom and kindness comes off her tongue. Many wives speak wisdom to their husbands, but many also forget to include kindness. As Dr. Emerson Eggerichs says, "Unfortunately, a wife's usual approach is to complain and criticize in order to motivate her husband to become more loving. This usually proves to be as successful as trying to sell brass knuckles to Mother Teresa."² Indeed, no man has ever changed due to contentious nagging. In fact, the Bible says *contentious words are like an annoying dripping faucet to a man* (*Proverbs 19:13*). However, wise wives that communicate with respect and kindness can become a husbands' greatest advisor, and bring peace to their home.

3. WISE PARENTS

Wise parents understand the sacred responsibility they have for the children in their homes. They do not let a child's 18+ years in their home go by frivolously. Instead, they are intentional with that

² Emerson Eggerichs, *Love & Respect: The Love She Desires; The Respect He Desperately Needs*, Integrity Publishers, 2004.

time and steward it well. Wise parents understand this truth noted by Dr. James Dobson, “Children are not casual guests in our home. They have been loaned to us temporarily for the purpose of loving them and instilling a foundation of values on which their future lives will be built.”³

A. They lead by **EXAMPLE**.

PROVERBS 20:7 *A righteous man who walks in his integrity—how blessed are his sons after him.*

Wise parents understand the importance of their actions. In Scripture, James explains that *faith without works is dead* (James 2:17). This principle could not be any more evident than in the home. For a watching child, a parent’s faith without works is dead. Children are watching our every move and looking for evidence of the faith that we profess. As many pastors have said for years, godliness is often more “caught” than “taught” by our kids. Children are always watching, so wise parents walk righteously and with integrity in their homes. When our children are little, they do what we say. When our children get older, they do what we do.

B. They lead through **WORDS**.

PROVERBS 1:8 *Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching;*

While a parent’s example is instrumental in a child’s spiritual development, we cannot overlook the necessity of their words. Throughout the Bible, God commands parents to teach in their homes (Deuteronomy 6) and serve as the primary source for their children’s discipleship. Wise parents embrace this high calling and instruct their kids. They do not outsource biblical teaching to the church or other ministries. Instead, they are intentional with their kids and talk about the goodness of God in their homes.

C. They lead through **DISCIPLINE**.

PROVERBS 22:15 *Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.*

The book of Proverbs constantly reminds parents of the importance of discipline in the home. Solomon explains that discipline will help correct and shape the mind of a child so he or she can go on to flourish in this world. Unfortunately, this is not how many people view discipline in the home. Warren Wiersbe explains,

Many modern educators and parents revolt against the biblical teaching of discipline. They tell us that ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ is nothing but brutal prehistoric pedagogy that cripples the child for life. But nowhere does the Bible teach blind brutality when it comes to disciplining children. The emphasis is on love, because this is the way God disciplines His own children.⁴

Wise parents understand they demonstrate their love to their kids by correcting them. They know that their primary goal is not to always be their kids’ best friends. Their primary goal is to help shape their hearts to love and honor God, live godly lives, and to one day establish their own godly homes. Wise parents keep their eyes on the long-term goal and persevere through the short-term pain that comes with disciplining a child.

³ James C. Dobson, *How to Raise Children that Love the Lord*, Chariot Family Publishing, 1991.

⁴ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Skillfull, God’s Guidebook to Wise Living*, David C. Cook, 2009, p. 124-125.

God designed the home, and He desires for it to be a place filled with love, joy, and peace for all who live in it. If we commit to building our homes with His wisdom, He will transform our lives as husbands, wives, and parents.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

God has given each of us an amazing opportunity to build a home. God even gave us the tools and blueprint to do this incredibly challenging building project. It takes time. It takes energy. It takes the willingness to put forth the effort. The question is what kind of home are you going to build?

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus speaks of how different homes are built. He concludes by stating that it all comes down to the foundation that is laid. If the foundation is shaky and constantly moving like sand, the house will not withstand any sort of proverbial wind or rain. However, if the house is built on a solid foundation such as God's Word it can withstand the storms of life.

MATTHEW 7:25 *And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.*

It all comes down to the choices you make when you build the house making it into a home. By choosing the wise ways of God, you will be laying a rock-solid foundation. That does not mean that challenges will not arise, or that the changing winds of culture will not tempt your family. The reality is 'life' happens in such a way that we experience challenges and obstacles beyond our control. Yet, if we rely on the wisdom of God we have more than a fighting chance, we have hope and purpose that comes from walking in a relationship with Jesus Christ. It will be a home where His plan becomes our family purpose.

PURPOSE

OF WORDS

DATE

June 27-28

WEEK

4 of 10

OVERVIEW

Proverbs 18

KEY VERSE

Proverbs 18:21

SETTING THE STAGE

It is amazing how some things in this world can produce both good and bad results! Used one way, it may bring life and joy, but used another way, the same thing may bring pain and destruction. For example, consider medicine. When used properly, it brings healing and remedy to those in need. But when used improperly, it can bring sickness or even death. The same argument could be made for exercise. Every doctor in the world would endorse exercise as a key ingredient to a healthy life. However, extreme exercise can bring injuries, dehydration, and even heat strokes. If you take a walk outside today, the sunlight will bring your body much needed Vitamin D. But if you walk outside too long, the same sunlight could bring you a sunburn or even skin cancer down the road.

The truth is our tongues could be put into this same category of paradoxes. The same tongue that was used to praise the Lord in Worship can be used to yell at someone in a crowded church parking lot. Our words are used to compliment someone in one moment or belittle them minutes later. Our speech can be used to cast vision and hope, or it can be used to bring discouragement and fear. Indeed, the tongue wields an amazing power (*James 3*). Solomon put it this way,

PROVERBS 18:21 *Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

Continued on page 28 >

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Unspoken Words
2. Life-Giving Words
3. Life-Taking Words
4. Empowered Words

THINGS TO KNOW

- The word "tongue" is used 19 times in Proverbs and 113 times in the Old Testament.
- The word "word" or "words" is used 30 times in Proverbs and 1262 times in the Old Testament.

PURPOSE

OF WORDS

Setting the Stage, continued >

King Solomon understood the immense power that God gave each of us through communication. Words are our greatest tool to build up the Kingdom of God, but they also can be our greatest weapon to tear it down. Because of that, we must understand the purpose of our words. Fortunately, the book of Proverbs gives ample instruction on this topic. As one commentator says, “Accurate, honest, sensitive, prudent speaking is a theme threaded through Proverbs as consistently and strongly as any other.”¹ Examining this topic in the book of Proverbs we will discover the purpose of our words and learn how to steward them well.

1. UNSPOKEN WORDS

PROVERBS 10:19 *When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.*

Remember those fun science experiments in school that our teachers would demonstrate in class? Of course, the most memorable ones were the classic experiments that involved a big explosion at the end. One of the most common was the “Mentos Experiment,” where the teacher would combine breath mints with a diet cola. As soon as the mints are dropped into the bottle, the soda begins to shoot into the air like a geyser leaving a huge mess to clean up.

In our lives, some of us can identify with those mints. When we get dropped into a situation or a conflict, our words start flying out like that a geyser leaving a big mess to clean up. Most of the time, this is not our intention when we speak up. Many of us are just trying to be helpful and “fix things.” While this can be a blessing in some circumstances, it can also be a curse in others. Why? Because Solomon tells us it is better to “restrain” our lips at times.

James reiterates this point when he says it is often much wiser to be “*quick to hear and slow to speak*” (James 1:19). The truth is sometimes the most beneficial words we can provide are “unspoken words.” Contrary to some of our natural inclinations, every thought in our head does not have to

be articulated. Inner dialogue should not always become an outer dialogue. Instead, the prudent man or woman of God uses their words wisely. The great C.S. Lewis said it this way, “I have often repented of speech but hardly ever of silence.” So, before we begin looking at the **quality** of our words, it would be wise to first examine the **quantity** of our words. Do you always have the first say and the final say? If so, God might be reminding you that the wisest words you could adopt today are “unspoken words.”

When Solomon says, “*restrains his lips*” he is saying to keep your words in “check.” In Ecclesiastes, Solomon put it this way, “*A time to be silent and a time to speak*” (Ecclesiastes 3:7b). Wisdom comes from knowing when it is time to speak and when it is time to be silent.

Contrary to some of our natural inclinations, every thought in our head does not have to be articulated.



¹ David Hubbard, *The Preacher’s Commentary Vol 15*, Thomas Nelson, 2010, p. 406.

2. LIFE-GIVING WORDS

PROVERBS 10:11 *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.*

Think back to the start of the new year when some of us got back in the gym for the first time in a long time. Whether it was hopping on a treadmill, taking a workout class, or playing a game of pick-up basketball, undoubtedly those first few days were exhausting! And while we may have all suffered in different gyms and different classes, I bet we all sought relief in the same way: a water break. When we were exhausted and our bodies began to shut down, we all gravitated to a water fountain as a common source of restoration and revitalization. Why? Because water restores us and gives us the fuel we need to persevere in our race.

In the same way, Proverbs tells us that our words are like a beautiful water fountain. We are told that our mouths can be a “fountain of life” that brings nourishment to the world. Every day, we live in a broken world that is filled with emotionally and spiritually exhausted people. This is one reason why God gave us the gift of words. He wants us to speak life into others that desperately need it. *Proverbs 25:11* says “*Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances.*” When we open our mouths and speak encouragement and hope into someone’s life, we honor God by accepting His invitation to serve as His ambassador (*2 Corinthians 5:20*). Solomon says these kinds of words are sweeter than an apple and more precious than silver or gold. These comparisons remind us that words are nutritious to the soul and valuable to the spirit. It does not take a Ph.D. to utilize words to encourage and speak life into a person in need.

Words have the power to change someone’s outlook for the better. We are told in Proverbs, “*Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad*” (*Proverbs 12:25*). This good word is not always a solution to take away the problem. Instead, as one author explains, “A good word is wider than the good news which would remove the cause of the anxiety but is not always possible; a good word gives courage to face it.”²

Words have the power to change someone’s outlook for the better.

Many of us fail to speak up because we fear that we will not have the “right” word. Life-giving words are not always focused on offering solutions. Instead, they are focused on pointing them to the solution that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, referred to as the **Word** in John’s Gospel.

3. LIFE-TAKING WORDS

PROVERBS 25:18 *Like a club and a sword and a sharp arrow is a man who bears false witness against his neighbor.*

As clearly as we can remember the people who spoke life into our souls, we can likely remember the people that spoke painful and damaging things into our hearts. Words do matter, and their messages are remembered long after the conversation ends. Because of that, we must be careful to not speak life-taking words. In Genesis 3, Satan took the good gift of words and he tainted it with sin to wreak havoc on the world. He used words to rob God of His glory, to deceive Adam and Eve, and to bring a wake of destruction that would permeate all future generations. Warren Wiersbe explains, “From Satan’s speech to Eve in Genesis 3 to the propaganda of the false prophet in the book of Revelation, the Bible warns us that words can be used to deceive, control, and destroy.”³

² Derek Kidner, *Tyndale OT Commentaries*, Intervarsity Press, 2009, p. 94.

³ Wiersbe, *Be Skillful*, p.144.

**When our words are
weaponized, our
speech no longer
gives life.**

Indeed, words have ruined marriages, friendships, and businesses. They have brought more conflicts and wars in human history than we could count. When our words are weaponized, our speech no longer gives life. Instead, our verse above tells us that our words become clubs and swords that hurt everyone around them. Our words can bring lies and confusion (*Proverbs 26:19*). They can stoke the fire of someone's anger and solicit violence (*Proverbs 29:22*). They can spread gossip and end relationships (*Proverbs 20:19*). Because of that, we must do what any responsible weapon owner would do: lock them up. We have to understand the power of our words and not throw them out there carelessly. We must capture our thoughts (*2 Corinthians 10:5*) and consider the consequences of our words before we say them. Forgiveness can always be sought after, but words can never be taken back. Are you careless with your words and do they consistently take life away from those around you? Sometimes it merely takes a quick quiet breath to rethink what words to say and how to respond to a situation graciously rather than offensively.

4. EMPOWERED WORDS

PROVERBS 4:23 *Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.*

If we understand the danger of life-taking words and we desire to speak life-giving words instead, the simple question of application is, "How do we do it?" How do we learn to crucify those thoughtless words and begin speaking purposeful ones instead? Solomon tells us that we have to watch over our hearts. Solomon was wise enough to understand that our words are not just cavalier thoughts. They are an overflow of what is going on in our hearts. Jesus reinforced this point when He explained, "*For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart*" (*Matthew 12:34b*).

**Our speech will only
be transformed
when we begin
to let God's Word
transform our lives.**

The two wisest men to walk on this earth, Jesus Christ and King Solomon, are in unanimous agreement on the secret to changing our speech. They both say that the only way we can transform our words is if we first let our hearts be transformed. Our speech will never change through reading books, expanding our vocabulary, or through sheer will power. Our speech will only be transformed when we begin to let God's Word transform our lives. Wiersbe says it this way:

People who speak wisely, saying the right thing at the right time in the right way, are people who store God's truth in their hearts. 'Wisdom is found on the lips of him who has understanding' (*Proverbs 10:13*), and that understanding comes from the Word of God. 'Wise people store up knowledge' (*Proverbs 10:14*); they are filled 'richly' with the Word of God (*Colossians 3:16*). 'The heart of the wise teaches his mouth and adds learning to his lips' (*Proverbs 16:23*). If we devote our hearts to serious study of the Word, even while we're sharing the truth with others, God will teach us more of His truth. ⁴

God does not want us to speak alone. That is in part why His Holy Spirit lives inside of us (*Ephesians 1:13, Luke 12:12*). God wants to empower my words and your words to make an eternal impact on others. He wants to redeem our speech and make it operate the way He designed it: to bring glory to Him and to build up His kingdom. But the only way we will achieve this is if we dedicate ourselves to His Word. As you begin reading God's Word more often, you find that your words begin to more closely imitate His. We all want to speak life and not death in this world. But our only hope at doing so is through a transformational commitment to God and His Word.

⁴ Wiersbe, *Be Skillful*, p.144.

Words matter to others, but most importantly they matter to God. When we understand the purpose of our words, we will begin to use them for God's glory and to build up His Kingdom around us.

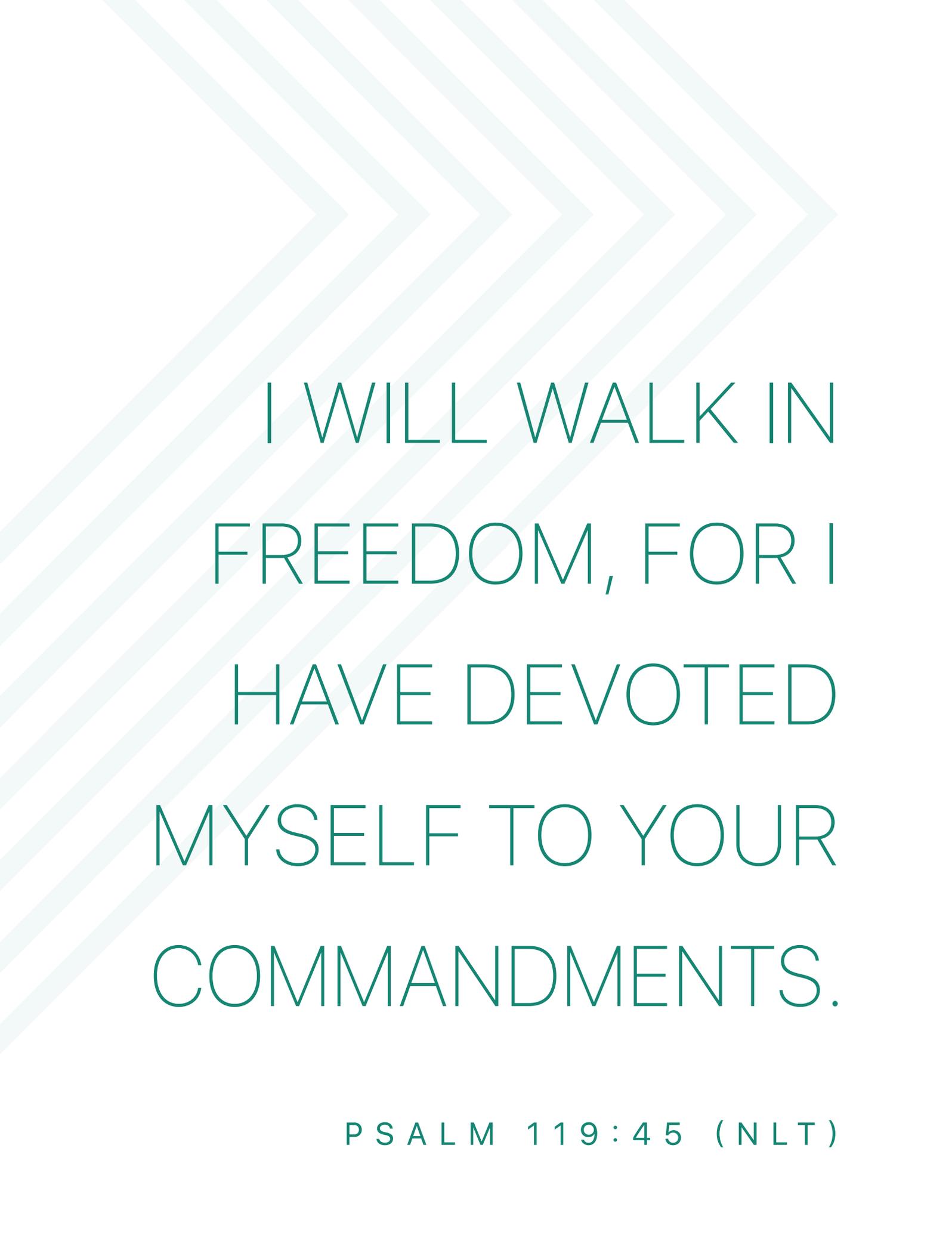
HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Consider how the story began in the beginning. *Genesis 1:1* says, “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” In the creation story, we are told very specifically that God spoke the world into existence, the ultimate power of words. *Genesis 1:3* says, “*Then God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light.*” From the beginning, God's story impacted our story literally through the spoken word. Those true life-giving words laid a foundation of life to come, in relationship to Adam and Eve.

God then allowed Adam to speak authoritatively as he named the animals. Adam and Eve spoke to God when He asked what happened to cause them to hide in shame of their nakedness. God spoke to Adam and Eve in describing the consequences of their actions. Consider the times Moses would go up the mountain to talk to God and God would speak to Moses; then Moses would come down the mountain to speak to the people the truth of God. Words have always been part of our story. Our relationship with God and others is always impacted by words, both the Word of God and physically spoken words one to another.

Just as God spoke our life into existence, He wants us to speak life into others. Words are a beautiful gift from God that can be instrumental in bringing Him glory and expanding His Kingdom. Words come with responsibility and opportunity. The purpose of words is to encourage, empower and edify others for the glory of God.

PSALM 19:14 *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.*



I WILL WALK IN
FREEDOM, FOR I
HAVE DEVOTED
MYSELF TO YOUR
COMMANDMENTS.

P S A L M 1 1 9 : 4 5 (N L T)

PURPOSE

OF FREEDOM

DATE

July 4-5

WEEK

5 of 10

OVERVIEW

Psalm 119:1-56

KEY VERSE

Psalm 119:45

SETTING THE STAGE

Psalm 119 is unique in its length and specific authorship as we do not know who wrote this particular psalm. Yet, it takes the reader on a journey of adoration and reverence for the Word of God that is very personal. This psalm is the longest chapter in the Bible with 176 verses. Ironically, it is a psalm about the Bible as it emphasizes the Word of God in terms of the law, precepts, statutes, commandments, and ways. This psalm contains the longest acrostic in the Bible consisting of 22 stanzas, corresponding to the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza is comprised of eight verses, each beginning with the same letter. ¹ C. S. Lewis compared this psalm to a piece of embroidery, done stitch by stitch in the quiet hours for the love of the subject and the delight in leisurely, disciplined craftsmanship. ²

We have looked at the Story of Purpose in a variety of ways, and this week we appropriately consider the Purpose of Freedom. Psalm 119 is all about freedom, though we will focus on just a handful of verses for this lesson. When God established the Ten Commandments, He did so to give order and freedom to His people, not confusion and restriction. Nor did God provide commandments so that His people could be “good enough” to earn freedom. Remember that the commandments of God were given “after” the people were set free from slavery and bondage. It was in the context of freedom that God gave His commandments to

Continued on page 34 >

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Freedom Found in Mercy
2. Freedom to Walk
3. Freedom to Speak
4. Freedom of Expression

THINGS TO KNOW

- The Hebrew word ‘Rachab’ is translated as “liberty” or “freedom.”
- The root meaning of the word ‘Rachab’ means “broad” or “wide.”
- The concept is to be “unrestrained.”

PURPOSE OF FREEDOM

Setting the Stage, continued >

to establish a people, culture and community that would be based on His principles that were for their good and not harm.

So it is for us. As we celebrate our freedom as a country, we celebrate the freedom we have in God through Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel, he eloquently phrased it like this *"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)*. The Word of God took on human form so that we may behold Him. We are to take notice of the Word of God as it reflects both grace and truth. Jesus even took it a step further when in His own words said, *"So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'" (John 8:31-32)*. Psalm 119 is all about the Word of God, truth and freedom as it ultimately points us deeper into Scripture and closer to Jesus Christ.

Introduction

This week we are celebrating the freedom we have in this country. In September 1620, 102 people were willing to risk their lives and their future for a taste of freedom. They were quite literally "all in" as it pertained to seeking freedom. These 102 passengers boarded a boat called the Mayflower, traveled 66 days to embark on new land with new freedom.

Throughout history, people have sought freedom. In the context of the Bible, God's people have always been on a journey seeking freedom, whether it was Noah and his family seeking freedom from the flood or Moses and the Israelites seeking freedom from slavery in Egypt.

God used Joshua to lead the Israelites into the freedom of the Promised Land. God used Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem once God's people were set free from captivity in Babylon. And 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ died on the cross taking the sins of the world upon Himself so that all people throughout the world could have freedom for all eternity in relationship with Him.

Freedom has always been a blessing to people. Physical freedom. Emotional freedom. Political freedom. Mental freedom. Spiritual freedom. In each instance, freedom should never be taken for granted but be embraced as a blessing. There is a specific purpose for freedom. Those who have been set free, have been set free to live. This week, we will celebrate freedom by looking at the purpose and the blessing of freedom, in perhaps the unlikeliest of places; Psalm 119.

Psalm 119 is all about the Word of God. Though we do not know who wrote this particular psalm, it is evident the author was passionate and respectful of the Word of God. There is a sense of urgency



¹ *The Complete Jewish Study Bible*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, p. 1029.

² www.soniclight.com/Psalms

in all 176 verses in this chapter, each one directing the reader to the law, precepts, commandments, ways, testament; all referring ultimately to the Word of God.

We will focus on just a few of the 176 verses beginning in Psalm 119:41.

1. FREEDOM FOUND IN MERCY

PSALM 119:41-43 *May Your lovingkindnesses (mercies) also come to me, O LORD, Your salvation according to Your Word; ⁴²So I will have an answer for him who reproaches me, For I trust in Your Word. ⁴³And do not take the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, For I wait for Your ordinances.*

Freedom comes when we realize we are in need. There are so many circumstances of life that are beyond our control that restrict us emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. We become stagnant in our fear and trembling. We are a people collectively in need of freedom. Yet, perhaps more significant each of us needs to realize that as an individual “I need freedom.” We need to look at this freedom on a personal level.

Freedom comes when we realize we are in need.

There is not a person in the world who is without fault or guilt today. Each of us has failed. If we were to dwell on that fact it would be depressing, demeaning and defeating. The psalmist realized that without God there was guilt, judgment, defeat, and bondage. But in verse 41, there is a glimmer of hope found in reality beyond circumstances. He is crying out to God with urgency and confidence. “*May Your lovingkindnesses/ mercies also come to me, O LORD.*” Do not miss the plural of “mercies.” C. H. Spurgeon said, “He (the psalmist) needed much mercy and varied mercy, hence the request is in the plural; requesting from God rather than from man.”³ The psalmist is no different than us. We all need much and varied mercy. On any given day we find ourselves stressed out, overwhelmed and on the verge of throwing up our hands in defeat. But be of good courage, there is mercy in the Lord. Not just singular mercy, but plural; mercies.

The prophet Jeremiah realized that same truth and expressed it this way in Lamentations 3:22-23, “*The LORD’S lovingkindnesses (mercies) indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. ²³They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.*” These verses were written in a book called Lamentations which means Jeremiah was lamenting the circumstances of life, which just so happened to be the bondage of God’s people in Babylon. But he realized as did the psalmist that there is freedom in the mercies of God. Daily freedom that never ceases. Daily freedom in the form of compassion and faithfulness. Even in the midst of restrictive circumstances, there is freedom by the mercies of God.

Even in the midst of restrictive circumstances, there is freedom by the mercies of God.

Now look at the end of verse 41 as the psalmist describes what that mercy looks like “*Your salvation according to Your word;*” The word “salvation” quite literally means to be delivered out of your circumstances. There is freedom in the mercies of God that will save us from that which we deserve. Paul is very clear when he writes in Romans 6:23, *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The mercies of God not only overshadow the wages of sin but blot them out completely because of the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The Psalmist goes on to say in Psalm 119 that there will be those who question or doubt this kind of freedom. Regardless of who may or may not question the freedom found in the mercy and salvation of God, it comes down to your trust in God’s Word. This is foundational for each

³ C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David, Volume 3 Psalms 111-150*; Zondervan Publishing House 1979, Grand Rapids, MI; p. 226.

Christ-follower, as we put our trust in the Word of God; both in the truth of the Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ.

2. FREEDOM TO WALK

PSALM 119:44-45 *I will keep on obeying your instructions forever and ever. ⁴⁵I will walk in freedom, for I have devoted myself to your commandments. (NLT)*

As we experience the mercies and salvation of the Lord, there is movement not stagnation.

The life of a Christ-follower is one of continued learning and growing. It is not something that is done just one time in a person's life. Nor is it designed to be done just one time a week in a specific location such as a church building. The life of a Christ-follower is just that, life. We are to be living and breathing people of God in a world that does not stop but keeps on moving faster and faster.

There is optimism in the words of the psalmist, "I will keep on obeying. I will walk in freedom." Both are phrases marked by movement and confidence. There will be people in your life that will not understand why you respect, revere and obey the Word of God. To many people today the Bible is a collection of old stories that may or may not be true. It is considered to be literature but nothing more. But there is a reason that the Bible continues to be the best-selling book of all time. There is a reason that the full Bible is translated into 698 languages; the New Testament is translated into 1,548 languages. ⁴ There is a reason that the Bible has documented history, geography, and culture in the context of God's Word. We are to do exactly as the psalmist vowed to do, *keep on obeying the instructions of God*, regardless of whether or not friends and family understand.

There will be people who will not understand why you take time out of your weekend to go to church. After a long week at work, certainly you deserve to be on the golf course or at the park instead of going to church. There will be those who will challenge your belief system in how you make choices and prioritize your life. But as we have seen over the last several months of our study, others throughout history had to make the same choice on whether or not to keep moving forward with confidence and optimism.

Joshua put it like this, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego put it like this, "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Daniel 3:17-18). Nehemiah, a cupbearer to the king, walked in freedom to Jerusalem to organize God's people to rebuild the wall and establish a new home.

We have freedom to walk the path before us with confidence as we devote ourselves to His Word. The devotion means it is a choice we make to be committed to His Word, seeking answers to life in His Word. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). It is the illumination of His Word guiding us each step of the way.

3. FREEDOM TO SPEAK

PSALM 119:46 *I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings and shall not be ashamed.*

There will be people who will not understand why you take time out of your weekend to go to church.

We have freedom to walk the path before us with confidence as we devote ourselves to His Word.

⁴ www.wycliffe.org/uk statistics from October 2019.

We enjoy the freedom of speech in this country, though it has been debated in a variety of settings over the years. However, with that freedom comes responsibility. And as Christ-followers, we have a responsibility to speak of the testimonies of God. It is our opportunity to tell other people our story of what God has done in our life. In this verse, the psalmist gives the example of speaking before kings and not being ashamed. It reminds us that we have nothing to be ashamed of when we base our life on the Word of God. Earlier this year we challenged our church to embrace a program called “Focus Your Influence.” It was a challenge to focus on 20 people, to pray for them and share our faith story with them in the year 2020.

We each have a circle of influence at work, home, in neighborhoods, community activities, sports leagues, and more. We have the freedom to speak truth in those settings as we have an opportunity. Paul would say it like this, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek*” (Romans 1:16).

We are to be bold in our freedom of speech without shame or embarrassment. Whether it be in front of a king or a cashier. Whether it be in front of a Jew or Muslim. The Gospel is far-reaching as noted by Paul in the verse above. It is for both the Jew and the Greek; that encompassed everyone in the first century! The psalmist references the extreme of their time of speaking to the kings. For us, it would be talking to a family member, neighbor or co-worker using discernment in our freedom.

4. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

PSALM 119:47-48 *I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. ⁴⁸And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will meditate on Your statutes.*

Two times the psalmist uses the phrase, ‘*which I love*’ as He is talking about the commandments of God. There is a very personal connection between the psalmist and the Word of God. It is an emotional connection that goes beyond the intellectual understanding and appreciation of God’s Word. Rather, it has penetrated his very soul as exemplified by the phrase ‘*which I love*’ to describe God’s Word.

For many of us, we delight in a sunny day at the park. We delight in an extra day off from work. We delight in a bonus on the paycheck. How often do we delight in the commandments of God? I have to remind myself to pause and reflect on true delight in God’s Word. There is no doubt I revere the Word of God. I believe the Word of God. I embrace the Word of God foundationally in making life choices. But do I daily delight in the Word of God?

The psalmist is saying there is freedom of expression in underscoring appreciation with delight. Notice what this freedom of expression causes the psalmist to do. In verse 48, he says, “*And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments.*” This is not worshipping the commandments themselves, rather it is an expression of his delight of and love for the commandments of God. If you have ever been at a ballgame and your child scores a run, makes a basket, kicks a goal, or catches a pass, dare I say you have raised your hands in delight and love. You did not raise your hands merely because it was a goal, run, or basket; you delight and love your child in such a way that you celebrate that which he or she accomplished. God’s Word is His revelation of Himself to us. We are to delight and love His Word in such a way that we celebrate His truth as it is revealed in Scripture.

We are to delight and love His Word in such a way that we celebrate His truth as it is revealed in Scripture.

And then it is almost as if the psalmist takes a deep breath, puts his hands down to his lap and bows his head as he meditates on the statutes of God. The reality is that you cannot just throw your hands in the air and call it a day, there needs to be a time that you reflect, meditate and pray. Psalm 1:1-2 says it like this, “*How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of*

the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! ²But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.”

Again, we see the combination of delight and meditation. Meditating on the Scripture means you study, ponder, pray and reflect on the Word of God. We are fortunate to live in a country where we have the freedom to read and study the Word of God; freedom to delight and meditate on His truth.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The commandments, laws, precepts of God are not restrictive, through obedience they allow us to experience freedom. In these verses, the writer talks about keeping the laws and yet being free. Contrary to what we often expect, obeying God’s laws does not inhibit or restrain us. Instead, it frees us to be who God designed us to be. By living God’s way, we have the freedom to fulfill God’s plan for our lives.⁵ There is nothing greater than walking in freedom and moving forward with confidence.

The mercies of God allow us to be free. Freedom to walk. Freedom of speech. Freedom of expression. The greatest freedom of all is the freedom we have in Jesus Christ. The ultimate freedom at the ultimate cost; the crucifixion of Jesus who was innocent yet bore our sins. We celebrate our country’s freedom this week, but more importantly, let us celebrate our freedom in Christ.

JOHN 8:36 *So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*

⁵ *Chronological Life Application Study Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, IL 1988, p. 879.

PURPOSE

OF GOD'S WAYS

DATE

July 11-12

WEEK

6 of 10

OVERVIEW

Proverbs 14

KEY VERSE

Proverbs 14:12

SETTING THE STAGE

If we could sum up the book of Proverbs we would say that Proverbs is wisdom through principle. It is a book of short sayings or maxims that pointedly convey truth. According to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. And while he wrote most of the proverbs in this book, later chapters indicate that he was not the only author of the book.¹

The purpose of Proverbs is to provide wisdom for living through special instruction on life: folly, sin, goodness, wealth, poverty, the tongue, pride, humility, justice, family (parents, children, discipline), vengeance, strife, gluttony, love, laziness, friends, life, and death. It is touted as the most practical book of the Bible in terms of wisdom for daily living.

The underlying theme of Proverbs is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. (Proverbs 1:7a). To 'fear the Lord' is to stand in awe of His holy character and power. The book of Proverbs explains that true wisdom leads to the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 2:1-5). The absence of a fear of God, however, leads to an unbridled and foolish life.

Throughout the book of Proverbs and all of Scripture, it is evident that obedience to God is a foundational part of wisdom. From the time of Adam and Eve, we see that disobedience to God never ends well and often results in severe consequences. Thus, Solomon shares that true wisdom produces true obedience. Proverbs 14:12 falls into a larger section of the Proverbs (10:1 - 15:33) written by Solomon in which he contrasts the godly and the wicked.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Seemingly Good Way of Self-Effort
2. The Seemingly Good Way of Works
3. The Seemingly Good Way of Religion

THINGS TO KNOW

- The Hebrew word 'Mashal' is translated "proverb" or "allegory."²
- The basic meaning of the Hebrew word 'Mashal' is "a comparison."³

PURPOSE

OF GOD'S WAY

Introduction

If you are anything like me, you love shortcuts while driving. I pride myself on knowing shortcuts to get me from point A to point B quicker than the 'normal' route would take. Admittedly, there have been times when I thought my shortcut was the correct way, only to find out that I was wrong. This shortcut, which I thought was good and would get me somewhere fast, only led to me being lost, late, and let down. The funny thing is that there have been times I was not totally convinced that my short cut was correct, but I went anyway; usually to the dismay and frustration of my wife. Once down the road I soon discovered the way I thought was right turned out to be wrong!

We all have our shortcuts — roads in life that we are convinced will lead to something great.

Life is like that sometimes. We all have our shortcuts — roads in life that we are convinced will lead to something great. We have relationship roads. We have career roads. We have money roads. We even have religious roads. Many of us have found out the hard way that these roads we were so convinced would lead to something great, lead to the opposite. Solomon's words ring true, "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death*" (Proverbs 14:12).

In other words, there is a way that seems so right to us, but this seemingly good way actually leads to something bad. Why? Because we are going it alone. God is not on the road with us.

There is a way that seems so right in our relationships, but as many of us know without God in a relationship it will likely fail. There is a way that seems so right in our careers, but as many of us know, without God we will always be searching for another road. The road of money can become a highway of idolatry without God. Even when we think about the very Gospel of Jesus Christ, there are seemingly good things we do, but many times leave us hurt, frustrated, and lost because we operate in our own strength, doing what we think is best. We could sum up Proverbs 14:12 with one big idea:

Any seemingly good way without God is a bad way.

When we live disobedient lives and walk separate from God it leads to one outcome: death. To understand the importance and purpose of God's ways let us look at what can distract us. Seemingly good things that we may be chasing down the roads of life could potentially be bad, separating us

¹ Three sections of Proverbs are ascribed to Solomon; chapters 1:1-9:18; 10:1-22:16, and 25:1-29:27. However, the proverbs in the latter section (25:1-29:27) were selected from Solomon's collection by King Hezekiah's committee (25:1). Proverbs 22:17 refers to the "sayings of the wise," and 24:23 mentions additional "sayings of the wise." Proverbs 22:17-21 serves as an introduction which suggests that these sections stem from a circle of wise men, not from Solomon himself. Chapter 30 is specifically attributed to Agur, son of Jakeh, and 31:1-9 to King Lemuel. Lemuel's sayings contain several Aramaic spellings that point to a non-Israelite background.

² Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary OT*, David C. Cook, 2007, p. 1055.

³ Ibid.



from God. Three come to mind when thinking about the Gospel:

1. The seemingly good way of self-effort.
2. The seemingly good way of works.
3. The seemingly good way of being religious.

1. THE SEEMINGLY GOOD WAY OF SELF-EFFORT

PROVERBS 14:12 *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (ESV)*

The writer of this proverb is speaking truth and reality. The reality is there are ideas and concepts in this world that ‘seem right.’ There are books with titles that ‘seem right.’ Some speakers have podcasts where the content ‘seems right.’ And the truth of the matter is that people believe the book titles, podcasts, speakers and authors at face value.

Many people believe that to come to God they must be perfect. In other words, have a clean life, perfect family, everything put together. Now, as Christ-followers we know that is not true. It is actually impossible to be perfect. It goes something like this, “I want to go to church, but I need to clean up my life first,” or “I like the thought of Christianity, but you do not know what I have done; can God really accept someone like me?” What is being expressed in these statements and many like them is that we need to do something to make ourselves ready for God to accept us. This plays out in life as self-effort, a form a self-improvement or behavior modification with a Christian twist.

The way of self-effort in and of itself is not bad, but it is hopeless without obedience to God. The Gospel is an inside-out movement, not the reverse, yet many live on the road of self-effort, trying to do good things on the outside to improve themselves on the inside in their own strength and on their own terms. The problem is that no matter how much self-effort a person makes, it does nothing to change a heart. But once a heart changes everything else follows as the Gospel is inside out. Trying to change your heart by changing your behavior will only lead you farther down a way that seems good but will continually end in frustration and heartache.

The way of self-effort in and of itself is not bad, but it is hopeless without obedience to God.

Years ago, a movement swept evangelicalism by storm. It was the WWJD movement. It stood for “what would Jesus do” and was printed on bracelets, shirts, bumper stickers, etc. The goal was to wear the bracelet and when you were faced with temptation to ask: “what would Jesus do?” The goal was for people to ask this and not make bad choices because Jesus would not do whatever was tempting you. Though it helped many, it also caused a lot of frustration. Many could not change their behavior and therefore they continued to struggle. No matter how much self-effort they put in, nothing was changing. Here is why- changing our behavior will never change our hearts. However, when your heart is changed, your behavior will change.

While WWJD is a great question to ask, a better one to ask is WDJJ: “what did Jesus do?” He died a death you should have died. He took your place. He took your punishment. Three days later He rose from the grave and defeated the power of death forever. This is Good News. No amount of self-effort could have ever accomplished this.

If you find yourself on the way of self-effort — *a way that seems good to man* — pull the car over, get out and stop trying harder. Self-effort might be a seemingly good way, but it is not God’s way. Jesus has done everything we need to be made right before God. When we put our faith in Christ the Spirit comes into our lives and starts to form us and shape us from the inside out. So, the answer to the question, “Can God really use someone like me knowing what He knows about me?” is an overwhelming ‘Yes!’ Not because of our efforts, but because of His grace! Not because of what we

have done, but because of what His Son did!

Closely related to the seemingly good way of self-effort is the seemingly good way of works.

2. THE SEEMINGLY GOOD WAY OF WORKS

PROVERBS 14:12 *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (ESV)*

There are a lot of people who do really good things for others. There are a lot of people who give a lot of hard-earned money for the good of others. They do good works regularly and it seems right, but its end is the way to death.

It does not always make logical sense. If someone truly helps another person, that should earn them points with God. If someone gives a lot of money to a non-profit charity, that should earn them points with God. It seems right. Admittedly, those volunteer work hours and financial support do help a lot of good people in good ways that change lives on this earth. However, when someone rests on the works that they accomplish as what will make them 'right' with God, then they have taken a different path than following God's ways.

Remember that it is the change of the heart that changes the behavior. Here is how Paul explained it to the church in Ephesus.

EPHESIANS 2:8-9 *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (ESV)*

There is no amount of money or good works that will get someone into heaven. It is simply and profoundly through faith in Jesus Christ. It is truly a 'gift of God.' There are a lot of people in our culture who believe that their good works both literally and figuratively are going to get them into heaven. As the proverb reminds us, "*There is a way that seems right to a man.*"

Good works are just that, 'good.' They are not life-changing for eternity. The money and volunteer work hours donated to a non-profit charity are good, even great; however, it does not open the gates of heaven without a change of heart in having faith in Jesus Christ. Now that does not mean that those who have a relationship with Jesus do not do good things, donate money, or help other people. Again, let us look at how Paul explains it to the church in Ephesus.

EPHESIANS 2:10 *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (ESV)*

Notice which comes first in this equation; created in Christ Jesus. Everyone who receives the free gift of God described in Ephesians 2:8-9 should realize that salvation is "*not a result of works.*"

Yet because of that relationship, because of that salvation, we have been created anew in Jesus Christ and there is a purpose for our new life in Christ. Ironically, to do good works. These good works are not to **establish** a relationship with Jesus, but **because** of the relationship with Jesus. Martin Luther said, "We are saved by faith alone, but never by a faith that stays alone."

If there was something that we could do to work for our salvation then it could not be free. The one who works is owed a paycheck, but grace is a free gift. The seemingly good way of works is a road that leads to disappointment, disobedience, and frustration in life. What is worse is that some of us have traveled the way of works for so long, we have missed the fact that God has made His grace available through Jesus, His Son, and our Savior.

Remember the words of Jesus, "*I am the way, truth, and life. No one comes to the Father except*

**Martin Luther said,
"We are saved
by faith alone, but
never by a faith that
stays alone."**

through me” (John 14:6). There is only one way to the Father, and it has nothing to do with our works. It is owed to no one, but by God’s grace available to anyone.

Up to this point, we have seen two seemingly good ways that without God are in reality ways of disobedience:

The seemingly good way of self-effort.

The seemingly good way of works.

Last, we will look at the seemingly good way of religion.

3. THE SEEMINGLY GOOD WAY OF RELIGION

PROVERBS 14:12 *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (ESV)*

Religion or the practice of doing religious things, like self-effort and works, flies in the face of the grace that is freely offered in the Gospel. Tim Keller explains that religion says, “Obey and God will love you.” On the other hand, the Gospel says, “God loves you, now obey.”⁴ The motivation of obedience is totally different with the Gospel. There are “religious” people who do a lot of seemingly right things but who are walking contrary to the Gospel. Why? Because they think by doing right things and religious deeds (going to church, going to mass, tithing, daily confession, etc.) they are accepted by God. The Gospel teaches the opposite of this type of religion. It teaches that God offers salvation not to those who earn it as a reward but to those who are unworthy and receive it as a gift, entering into a relationship. (*Ephesians 2:8-9*) Obedience is in response to the gift of grace.

So often people will go through the motions of attending church or a small group Bible Study class. They can check all the boxes of what it looks like to be a Christ-follower on the outside. But the outside is not the part that matters; it always comes down to the matter of the heart.

Obedience is in response to the gift of grace.

Jesus dealt with this issue on several occasions, but one in particular to a group of Pharisees, who were the most religious people in the first century. They knew the words of the prophets, the law of Moses and the Psalms and Proverbs. But it was just something that impacted them on the surface as they focused on the seemingly good way of religion.

In Matthew 23, Jesus says this to a group of Pharisees.

MATTHEW 23:25-27 *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷”*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. (ESV)

Jesus knew the truth of Proverbs 14:12, that the things that seem to be the right way lead to death. The Pharisees were fooling themselves in thinking that just because they were religious on the outside, they were in a relationship with God. Yet, the Pharisees rejected Jesus face to face; even though Jesus was the living fulfillment of the Scripture they had memorized.

A relationship with God through Jesus Christ is not based on external rules and regulations, it happens from the inside out, it begins in the heart.

⁴ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, Penguin Group, 2008.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

There are those who like to take shortcuts in life; but as Proverbs 14:12 reminds us, “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*” (ESV)

In His grace, God has given us a road map that is the GPS to eternity. Think of the letters GPS and let it remind you that the Bible shows us God’s Path to Salvation. None of us want to settle on what ‘*seems right to a man,*’ a mere mortal. Each of us wants to know the God of creation in a personal way. God has made it clear in His Word that He wants to know each one of us in a personal way.

It comes down to whether or not you want to try and take a short cut that will most certainly lead to death in terms of separation from God for eternity. Or you have a choice to follow the GPS found in Scripture. Salvation is a free gift that comes from having faith in Jesus Christ. And as a new creation we have a new purpose, to trust and obey His Word in such a way that His light shines through us for the good of others.

Another proverb brings attention to the fact that if you want to know the purpose of God’s ways, it begins in the heart.

PROVERBS 3:5-6 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.* (ESV)

PURPOSE

OF COMMUNITY

DATE

July 18-19

WEEK

7 of 10

OVERVIEW

Ecclesiastes 4

KEY VERSE

Ecclesiastes 4:9

SETTING THE STAGE

Ecclesiastes is a unique book in that there is not an easily defined setting, chronological timeline or countryside context. Yet, it is a book that transcends settings, timelines, and countrysides. Ecclesiastes is pure philosophy written as a confessional autobiography.¹ In this book, we get to see the questions that Solomon was pondering, the lessons that he was learning and the perspective of looking back over a life that was not always based on God's principles. In reading it, we can learn from his mistakes. Solomon was a king but was also considered a teacher and a preacher because of the wisdom and understanding bestowed on him by God. When reading Ecclesiastes, picture a speaker gathering a group of people together to listen to words of wisdom.

The name of the book is based on the Greek translation of a Hebrew word, 'Qohelet.' The Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (i.e. Old Testament) gave this book the name 'Ekklesiastes' transliterated into English as Ecclesiastes.² The root of that Greek word is 'Ekklesia' which means "assembly." In essence, the writings of this book are based on community, an assembly of people.

If you want to dig a bit deeper into the title itself, the Hebrew word 'Qohelet' is translated in the NASB as "preacher" and the NIV as "teacher," both being good translations.

Continued on page 46>

LESSON OUTLINE

1. God in Community
2. Purpose in Community
3. Three in Community

THINGS TO KNOW

- Community is not just what we do; it is who we are.
- God exists in community with Himself as the Trinity.
- Ecclesiastes helps the reader develop a God-centered worldview and recognize the dangers of a self-centered worldview.³

PURPOSE

OF COMMUNITY

Setting the Stage, continued >

And where do preachers and teachers do their preaching and teaching? Traditionally in a church community; an assembly of people. Solomon, in his wisdom, realized that these words which are recorded in this book are best embraced in the context of community.

Introduction

One could argue that there has never been a time where our culture has been more obsessed with self-discovery and finding our true selves than right now. Websites such as Ancestry.com and 23AndMe.com have surged in popularity, making DNA testing more accessible and available than ever before. People want to know their heritage, their background, and their cultural makeup. They want to know who they really are.

And as popular as discovering one's history has become, it seems as if there is even more excitement over discovering one's personality type. Personality tests such as the Enneagram, Myer's Briggs, and Strengths Finders have soared in recent popularity. People want to know their strengths, their uniqueness, and how best to connect with others.

Community is not just what we do; it is simply who we are.

Whether it is ancestry (what has **made** you, you) or whether it is personality (what **makes** you, you), people are on a chase to discover who they really are. This should not be surprising, as the Bible speaks to the concept of identity thoroughly and frequently throughout Scripture. However, how this conversation starts might be different than we might otherwise assume.

Our culture begins the exploration of self-discovery by starting with ourselves, which seems natural. But the Bible begins the exploration of self-discovery by starting not with our self, but with God. And in seeing a clearer picture of God, we will begin to see who God made us to be. As we will see today, we are deeply relational, communal people. Community is not just what we do; it is simply who we are.

1. GOD IN COMMUNITY

The stated purpose for people to be engaged in community with one another is not just about a special 'spiritual' pandering to those who are naturally 'social butterflies' or those who are exuberant extroverts. Nor, does the purpose of life in community imply a personal experience of

¹ Dr. Ed Young, *Been There. Done That. Now What?* Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville TN; 1994, p. 1

² www.soniclight.com/ecclesiastes

³ John E. Johnson, "The Special Relevance of Ecclesiastes for Contemporary Culture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:674 (April-June 2012): p.159-71.



being energized by people around you. If so, then the extroverts would be more spiritually ‘ahead’ than the introverts. Myers-Briggs test, anyone?

ENTJ? What a great Christian!

INFP? Better luck next time!

If this were the case, it would only contribute to boosting pride or deepening despair, based on wherever you fell on the personality spectrum. If this were what Christian community meant all along, we would be in some kind of trouble no matter our personality type.

The purpose for community is not God’s competition for us to compete in, it is His accommodation for us to experience more of Him and the life we were meant to live. This does not mean that your ‘ideal’ community ought to be large or small or deep or wide or every day or every-other-day or even once a week.

There is no hard and fast biblical formula or equation, except that we must gather as a church ‘frequently’ and live in such a way that we are sharing life with each other. The book of Hebrews exhorts us of the importance:

HEBREWS 10:24-25 *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (ESV)*

The word for “church” that we see in the New Testament’s original Greek language is the term ‘Ekklesia,’ which means “an assembly.” In other words, what makes the church truly the church, is not the programming, music, or activities. It is the gathering of the body of Christ, which has covenanted itself to one another — meeting together frequently.

Why is meeting together important, commanded, and exhorted?

There are many reasons why meeting together as a church and maintaining a level of biblical community can be good for your soul. But perhaps the greatest of all reasons is that God models this, and we are made in His image.

Maybe you are thinking, “Wait, God models going to church? How does that make sense?” Not quite, although He does meet with us in church gatherings. Community is not an explanation of what God does as much as it is a revelation of **who God is**.

The Bible explains to us that God exists in community, and He has done so for eternity, even before time, space, and matter began, in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a breathtaking view of God — that God is one in three, three in one. We will not be looking into how or why this is possible, but rather, that it is revealed to us—and it alone is the foundational truth for why community is important for us.

In other words, if God exists in community Himself, and if we are designed in His image, this means that God wired the need for community deep into the hard drive and operating systems of our souls.

When we neglect community, we become less of what God designed us to be, we become less... human. To be human — to be made in the image of a triune God — means fundamentally to be communal. If God exists in community (as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and if Jesus Himself felt the need to surround Himself with the larger community of twelve disciples and a smaller core group of three (Peter, James, and John), we would be foolish to think that fullness of life can happen without the Christian community.

The purpose for community is not God’s competition for us to compete in, it is His accommodation for us to experience more of Him and the life we were meant to live.

To be human — to be made in the image of a triune God — means fundamentally to be communal.

2. PURPOSE IN COMMUNITY

Since everything started with the existence of a triune God who existed eternally and fully in community from eternity past, and if this communal God created humankind in His image and all of life, this means the purpose of community is woven inextricably throughout the very purpose of life. To really live, and to really experience the life God designed us to have, we should prioritize weaving our lives into the lives of others, reflecting the perfect, good, and communal nature of God Himself.

To be sure, the Bible does not command your community to be large or small. It simply exhorts you towards community because there are certain advantages to having it. Read the passage again and see if you can see the three key ideas about community:

ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12 *Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. ¹¹Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? ¹²And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.*

We can clearly see that there are advantages to living in community. The three key ideas are 1) If you fall, your community can pull you up; 2) If you are cold, your community can warm you up; and 3) If you are weak, your community can strengthen you. Let's dig a little deeper.

A. When you fall, community can pull you up.

King Solomon wrote in the book of Proverbs, “*for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity*” (Proverbs 24:16, ESV). In biblical times, the number seven represented the number of completion. So, Solomon is saying that the righteous person falls completely...routinely...frequently...but, righteousness is not proven by not falling, but in the response after falling: **rising again.**

Significantly, Solomon pairs that truth in Proverbs 24 with this principle in Ecclesiastes 4. How can a righteous person get up and rise again after falling? By living in a community where they can be reached in the pit and lifted back up on their feet.

Generally speaking, living life in community serves as a necessary safeguard from being rattled by the brokenness of your circumstances or your own sin. The Bible does not promise that living in community means that you will not stumble or fall into a pit at times; in fact, it almost implies the opposite, that you will. But, living in community will provide a context where the strong and compassionate hands of others around you can pull you up when you are either too weak to get up yourself or your circumstances are too steep for you to get out on your own.

B. When you are spiritually cold, community can warm you up.

Look at verse 11, “*Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?*” This biblical principle exhorts us to stay close to one another.

When we face the coldness of life through pain, grief, hardship, or lack—one of the greatest temptations is to isolate because we do not want to be a burden to other people. Throughout the Bible, we are warned to not grow callous or cold at heart for the things of the Lord.

And Scripture is clear that it is easy for us to become cold and callous towards the person of God, the Word of God, and the mission of God—if the people of God are not involved. Hebrews 3:13

Generally speaking, living life in community serves as a necessary safeguard from being rattled by the brokenness of your circumstances or your own sin.

mentions, “*But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*” (ESV). The key elements involved are the people of God and the Word of God—together and acting at the same time. This verse just cannot happen without those two parties involved.

The author creates a key analogy for us: “What happens when a heart becomes hardened?” It usually happens when there is no blood running through it. Without the presence and flow of blood, the heart will become cold, hard, and lifeless. But with the presence and flow of blood, the heart will be warm, soft, and life-giving. The author essentially communicates that biblical community is necessary for spiritual thriving. Biblical community is a give-and-take of administering and ministering the life-giving Word of God to each other’s heart. When our hearts feel cold spiritually, it is usually a byproduct of either the people of God or the Word of God missing in our life or both.

Biblical community is a give-and-take of administering and ministering the life-giving Word of God to each other’s hearts.

C. When you are weak, community can strengthen you.

Lastly, we see a third truth about the purpose of community, that in your weakness, community will make you strong. The author writes, “*And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him*” (v. 12a).

Notice that the author does not say, “When are you weak” or “If you are weak.” Rather, he implies quite clearly, “It is certain you are weak. You **might** prevail against temptation or weakness or struggle; but in community, you **will** prevail.”

Our natural pride shrouds us from our own weakness and deludes us with overconfidence in our own abilities. Simply put, this is the nature and outworking of sin in our own lives: underestimating our weaknesses and overestimating our strengths. And the solution is quite surprising. The author does not say here, “Memorize more Scripture!” Although that is important. He does not say, “Pray more!” or “Get more sleep!” or “Self-care!” or “Listen to more sermons!” Although all those things are beneficial. He essentially is saying, “Live in community! Get an accountability group!”

Why? Perhaps it is because others will truly see you, will truly know you, and therefore, can finally help you. When we live in community, the darkness and secretiveness of sin loses its hold over us, slowly and surely. When we live in community, it brings things that are hidden out into the light, and it cleans us up. A while back, I heard that in biological organisms, whether in plants or animals, “Mutations grow in isolation.” So, it is with our spiritual lives as well.

The purpose of community can breathe life into our lives in so many different ways. As the passage infers, it can pull us up out of our pits and fallings; it can warm us up with the reviving Word of God when we are cold to the things of God, and it strengthens us against lures of the world and temptations toward sin. I heard a seminary professor say that in God’s divine humility, He created us for something other than just Himself: the community of others.

3. THREE IN COMMUNITY

There is one last phrase in the text that should strike you as rather peculiar. If you notice, throughout the passage, there are always two parties at work: you and another person. Yet, at the very end of verse 12, the passage notes, “*A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart*” (NASB) “*a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*” (ESV)

Did he mean to say, “A twofold cord is not quickly broken” instead? Perhaps it is because the

author recognizes that in biblical community, there are never only two parties involved, but three—**because God is also present.**

Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them*” (Matthew 18:20, ESV). In a context of biblical community, there are always three parties involved: you, your community, and God.

In a context of biblical community, there are always three parties involved: you, your community, and God.

If it is your spouse and you, your cord is not quickly broken with God in the middle. If it is your accountability partner and you, your cord is not quickly broken with God in the middle. If it is your church community, Bible study class, small group and you—your cord is not quickly broken with God in the middle.

In a biblical community, there are always three parties at work. The Apostle Paul gives us a picture of how this works in 1 Corinthians 12 when he analogizes the body of Christ to a human body and explains how it should operate based on how God designed the body to operate. Paul writes that God has given individuals in His church certain giftings and abilities so that they can work with one another, minister to one another, and be nourished by one another.

Think about the analogy that Paul gives us and let us try to apply these truths in real life.

For example, let us say the ear felt an irritating itch. And you are the ‘ear.’ How do you think God is going to answer your need for being ‘scratched’ so to speak? Do you think God will just answer it with a neurological-lightning bolt from heaven, and ‘POOF,’ the itch is gone?

Probably not, especially if we think about the dilemma of ‘scratching’ through the gridwork of Paul’s analogy about the church being like a human body. For instance, if all members of the church community function like a body—and if an ear had an itch—what would happen is that the brain would receive signals of ‘ITCH ON THE EAR’, and then the brain would send signals to the hand of ‘SCRATCH THE EAR.’ And then the hand would move upwards toward the face and then scratch the ear. Problem solved, the itch has been removed and the irritation has been relieved. The ear says, “Thank you, brain and hand!” And the brain and hand give each other a high-five (with the other hand of course), and say, “You are welcome ear!”

And so, it is with God’s church as well. God designed us such that we each need one another, and He has equipped each of us with the unique ability to serve and to be served by one another.

Truly, a threefold cord is not easily broken. It is modeled in our salvation and also in our sanctifying community.

This keeps us humble, but confident—a necessary tension that breathes life and flourishing into our being. This tension keeps us 1) **humble**, because we know that self-sufficiency and pride are not our friends, for they only isolate us and blind us. And this tension keeps us 2) **confident**, because we know that there are solutions and modes for help in the context of God’s church that can meet us in our every need, and they truly are our friends.

So, what does this mean for us, practically? It means that if we cut ourselves off from the community of the church, we are fundamentally cutting ourselves off from the main means through which God is trying to minister **to us** through others. And it also means the reverse. If we cut ourselves off from the community of the church, we are also cutting ourselves off from the main means through which God is trying to minister **through us** to others.

In other words, whenever we think we are reducing our threefold cord down to two strands, we actually reduce our threefold cord down to one strand. Because when we remove one strand from the equation (such as God or community), we actually lose both strands in the process. God ministers to us through community.

Biblical community, therefore, always happens in three. Even in the Gospel, you see all three persons of the Godhead working together, ministering together, and accomplishing together. The Father planned our salvation, the Son accomplished our salvation, and the Spirit applies salvation to us. And now, we have access to the Father because of the Son and through the Spirit.

Truly, a threefold cord is not easily broken. It is modeled in our salvation and also in our sanctifying community.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

This has been a year when we have had to deal with social distancing and even isolation. It has proven that we need one another in ways we have perhaps taken for granted. God has designed us for community. From the time of Adam and Eve until now, God has wanted us to be part of community.

Community is not our idea, it is God's idea. Not simply as His explanation for how we ought to live, but rather, as His revelation of who He is. If we fail to model our lives after this inherently relational Creator, we will fail to live up to our own design, having been made in His image, as inherently relational people.

Christian community is simply sharing a common life in Christ. It moves us beyond the self-interested isolation of private lives and beyond the superficial social contacts that pass for "Christian fellowship." The biblical ideal of community challenges us instead to commit ourselves to life together as the people of God.⁴

Let us pray for the humility to get connected to the body of Christ—not just for our own sake, but for the sake of others as well. Why? So that we can be a blessing to them, and so that they can be a blessing to us. It is truly His plan and our purpose to live in community.

⁴ www.bible.org/article/community-god's-design-growth; by Howard Macy.

I WILL BE GLAD
AND EXULT
IN YOU; I WILL
SING PRAISE TO
YOUR NAME,
O MOST HIGH.

PSALM 9:2

PURPOSE

OF PRAISE

DATE

July 25-26

WEEK

8 of 10

OVERVIEW

Psalm 9:1-11

KEY VERSE

Psalm 9:2

SETTING THE STAGE

The Psalms are a collection of songs and poems. They deal with real-life situations that are to be embraced. Sometimes that means we are to embrace that which causes us fear and dismay. Other times that means we are to embrace that which causes us to smile and jump for joy assuming we can jump! Throughout the Psalms, we see the fullness of life and death; confidence and fear; praise and sorrow.

The Psalms were written by different authors, though David is believed to have written approximately half of them, including the one we are looking at today. David experienced the fullness of life and wrote it as a crying out to God, a prayer and even a song. The Psalms allow us to reflect on the circumstances of the past, present, and future and learn from how David and other authors dealt with various aspects of life and death. The Psalms guide us to worship God regardless of the circumstances we might be facing. Dr. Thomas Constable reminds us that the Psalms reveal that worship grows out of something God has done for man.¹

We learn from the Psalms that worship is a matter of the heart, not circumstances. We also learn that praise is the foundation of worship and God is worthy of both praise and worship simply because He is God. David did not let circumstances dictate whether or when he would praise and worship God. *Continued on page 54 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Perspective of Praise
2. Protection in Praise
3. Provision with Praise

THINGS TO KNOW

- The Hebrew word 'Yadah' means "to shoot, throw, or cast down." It is an intentional movement towards something. This word is translated as "thanks" or "thanksgiving."
- The Hebrew word 'Zamar' means "to sing or play a musical instrument with the idea of plucking an instrument with fingers." This word is translated as "sing praise."
- With both words above, there is a giver and receiver. The one who gives thanks and sings praise does so with the intent of it being received.

PURPOSE

OF PRAISE

Setting the Stage, continued >

In Psalm 9 we see a psalm of praise and thanksgiving that seems illogical based on circumstances. But praise and worship throughout Scripture are never based on logic, but rather are an outward expression of our thanksgiving, gratitude and recognition of who God is in all His fullness.

Introduction

We have all experienced various times of trouble. Whether it was a loss of a loved one, a loss of a job, an illness, a divorce, or the coronavirus that impacted the world; there have been times of trouble in our lives. No one has been or will be exempt from difficulties, directly or indirectly.

Yet, we have each experienced times of celebration as well such as the birth of a child or grandchild, a marriage, a special vacation, a job promotion, or school graduation. It is in the times of celebration that we know exactly how to respond, whereas in times of trouble it is a bit more challenging.

On January 31, 1969, in London, England a group that had made a pretty good name for themselves recorded a song called “Let It Be.” Perhaps you have heard of The Beatles, they had a few hits. Paul McCartney wrote the song, “Let It Be” based on a dream he had of his mother Mary, who had died of cancer when he was 14 years old. Paul had this dream during a very difficult time in 1968 when the group was becoming more dysfunctional and considering breaking up. In the dream, he remembered the words his mother would tell him on how to deal with difficult situations in life. The opening verse of the song states the premise clearly:

When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom,
let it be. And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me, speaking words of
wisdom, let it be.

Though not a spiritual song there is a truth that we find in these words that are similar to what David writes in Psalm 9. David shows us how to respond to times of trouble not based on words from an earthly parent but based on faith in the wisdom, sovereignty, and protection of our Heavenly Father, praising God in times of trouble. Let’s take a look:

PSALM 9:1-11 *I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all Your wonders. ²I will be glad and exult in You; I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High. ³When my enemies turn back, They stumble and perish before You. ⁴For You have maintained my just cause; You have sat on the throne judging righteously. ⁵You have rebuked the nations, You have destroyed the wicked; You have blotted out their name forever and ever. ⁶The enemy has come to an end in perpetual ruins, And You have uprooted the cities; The very memory of them has perished. ⁷But the LORD abides forever; He has established His throne for judgment, ⁸And He will judge the world in righteousness; He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity. ⁹The LORD also will be a*



¹ www.soniclight.com/psalms

stronghold for the oppressed, A stronghold in times of trouble;¹⁰ And those who know Your name will put their trust in You, For You, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You. ¹¹ Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion; Declare among the peoples His deeds.

1. PERSPECTIVE OF PRAISE

PSALM 9:1-2 *I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all Your wonders. ²I will be glad and exult in You; I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.*

The first two verses resound with praise and thanksgiving. In the overall context of this particular Psalm, it does not make logical sense. As you keep reading you see David refer to *enemies* (v.3), the *wicked* (v.5), the *oppressed* (v.9), *times of trouble* (v.9) those who *hate him* (v.13), and *nations sinking down in the pit which they have made* (v.15). Honestly, it does not seem there would be a lot to be thankful for or sing praises about in a logical sense.

And that is the key. David was not logical in his praise. David was completely illogical “in times of trouble.” He had a perspective of praise regardless of the circumstances. It was a choice he made with intentionality. In the first two verses, David uses the phrase, “I will” four times. The first time being the one that sets the tone and becomes foundational for the entire psalm.

PSALM 9:1A *I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart;*

David did not put his faith in people, things, fame or fortune. He put his faith in God. His perspective of praise was focused exclusively on the LORD.

The word used in verse 1 for LORD is the Hebrew word “Yahweh/Jehovah.” This was the proper name of the one true God.² It was the personal name for God. The intimate name for God. Whenever this name for God was used, it would be a recognition and reminder of the God of the Covenant. David was giving thanks and praise to the God who made promises and kept promises to His people, even in times of trouble.

Logically David could have complained. Based on the words and phrases used in this psalm the circumstances were greater and deeper than mere ‘times of trouble.’ Logically he could have felt victimized, bullied and overwhelmed. All of which could have been valid feelings he had, though he did not dwell on those feelings and stay in that mindset. Logically he could have turned his back on God because of these ‘times of trouble.’ Logically he could have asked and pleaded with God asking, “what kind of God would let these times of trouble happen?”

But David had a different perspective. He had a perspective of praise which was an intentional choice. David did not wait for the feeling of praise to happen. He chose to praise God. In David’s heart and mind, he said with boldness and confidence, “I will.”

- I will praise you.
- I will tell of all your wonders.
- I will be glad and rejoice in you.
- I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.

With intentionality, David set forth to live a lifestyle with a perspective not based on circumstances but on praise. The perspective of looking at God for who God is as Creator, telling of all the wonders on heaven and earth. The perspective of being

David was giving thanks and praise to the God who made promises and kept promises to His people, even in times of trouble.

With intentionality, David set forth to live a lifestyle with a perspective not based on circumstances but on praise.

² biblestudytools.com/lexicon.

glad and rejoicing in God, not in what is circumstantial. The perspective of praise to His name who is Most High. In the New Testament Paul would refer to Jesus as “the name above all names” (Philippians 2:9-11).

2. PROTECTION IN PRAISE

PSALM 9:3-6 *When my enemies turn back, They stumble and perish before You. ⁴For You have maintained my just cause; You have sat on the throne judging righteously. ⁵You have rebuked the nations, You have destroyed the wicked; You have blotted out their name forever and ever. ⁶The enemy has come to an end in perpetual ruins, And You have uprooted the cities; The very memory of them has perished.*

David had made his choice to have the perspective of praise. Perhaps that perspective was enhanced by God’s protection. Notice in verse 3 he takes an abrupt change in tone from praise to a harsh reality. He begins to talk about enemies turning back. They were heading in one direction that would have been disruptive to David in some form or fashion and they retreated, which is amazing.

However, do not miss the next part of verse 3 where David did not take any credit for this, nor did he consider this to be a coincidence. It was God’s doing. God was protecting David in times of trouble. Remember part of the praise that David gave God was based on “telling of all your wonders” in verse 1? The wonders of God are not limited to the beauty of the sky, clouds, mountains or oceans. The wonders of God are not limited to the cuteness of animals and the awesomeness of kids, grandkids, nieces, and nephews. The wonders of God are all-encompassing. The wonders of God are such that sometimes it means your enemies will turn back and stumble before God. God, the Most High is protective of His people in ways we may not even be aware of at first, but then the light bulb moment happens and we realize that God is God and we are not.

The wonders of God are all-encompassing.

In verses 4-6, David uses the phrase “You have” six times. It is almost as if David cannot stop praising God for His protection. David did not even want to appear to take any credit for himself or pass it off as coincidental good luck. David was praising God in these words, noting that God was in control. God had his back. God was just. God was responsible for the consequences.

There is a great relief for us when we realize that God is in control. God wants to be a God of protection. Look at the words of the Psalmist below:

PSALM 91:1-4 *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. ²I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!” ³For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper and from the deadly pestilence. ⁴He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.*

When we walk with God we are in the shelter of the Most High, in the shadow of the Almighty. It is a reminder that God is bigger than us and protects us. He is our refuge and fortress. He delivers us from the snare of the trapper. He covers us with His pinions. Under His wings, we may seek refuge.

When we realize the truth of these passages we can say as David did with assurance, “You have” my best interest in mind. You have my back in times of trouble. When there is darkness, You are the light. When there are fears, You are my comfort. When there are doubts, You are faithful. When you have the proper perspective of praise, you realize the protection God provides in your life in good times and in times of trouble.

Beyond perspective and protection, we find God’s provision.

3. PROVISION WITH PRAISE

PSALM 9:7-11 *But the LORD abides forever; He has established His throne for judgment, ⁸And He will judge the world in righteousness; He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity. ⁹The LORD also will be a stronghold for the oppressed, A stronghold in times of trouble; ¹⁰And those who know Your name will put their trust in You, For You, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You. ¹¹Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion; Declare among the peoples His deeds.*

This year we have been reminded in very real ways of how precious life is and how quickly life can change. This psalm is a wonderful reminder of the reality that the LORD abides forever. He never ceases. He never changes. The Hebrew word for 'abide' is, 'Yashab' which literally means to dwell and sit down.³ That is a vivid picture of what God does in our lives. He dwells and sits down with us. God is not standing up ready to move on to something else. God is intimately interested in you as an individual, sitting down with you, dwelling forever.

There is comfort in knowing that the LORD abides forever and He is in control. One of the ways God is in control and provides for us is in the form of judgment and accountability. Rarely do we want to think of God as the God of judgment, because we tend to think of that as a negative. However, as we see in this context it is clearly positive. It is God who is in charge of providing that judgment, not you and me. God will judge the world in righteousness.

There is comfort in knowing that the LORD abides forever and He is in control.

For those who are in a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ, there is provision in these words. God has provided righteousness for every person who believes in Jesus Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:30 *But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.*

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21 *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

When God judges the world in righteousness, He will be looking at us through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, who provided salvation for those who believe. God provided a way for us to be with Him for all eternity, judged in righteousness.

God also provides a stronghold and refuge in times of trouble. I remember as a child when I was in trouble my first instinct would be to try and hide so I would not get caught. That rarely worked well for me. I was like the cat behind the curtain with the tail hanging out for all to see. But the good news of this psalm is that when we find ourselves in times of trouble, we do not have to hide, we have a stronghold not simply made by God, but God Himself is the stronghold.

Some translations use the word 'refuge' which is an accurate translation as 'stronghold.' But I like the picture in my mind when I read the word 'stronghold.' Can you imagine anything stronger than the grip of the hand of God? The One who created the earth, molding and shaping man from dust. The One responsible for Mount Everest and the Pacific Ocean. The One who flattened out the prairies of the Midwest and carved the coastlines. There is no stronger grip than the Hand of God on your life, especially in times of trouble.

The circumstances of life are often beyond our control. The fluctuation of the stock market is

³ biblestudytools.com/lexicon.

beyond our control. The changing moral compass in our culture is overwhelming, to say the least, and frustrating on most every level. But in times of trouble, we can praise God because He is our stronghold. He is our firm foundation in all circumstances both in good times and in times of trouble.

This realization leads David to another realization in verse 10.

PSALM 9:10-11 *And those who know Your name will put their trust in You, For You, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You. ¹¹Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion; Declare among the peoples His deeds.*

“Ignorance is worst when it amounts to ignorance of God, and knowledge is best when it exercises itself upon the name of God.”⁴

Often in times of trouble, we feel abandoned, neglected or rejected. We feel alone and isolated. Notice this provision that David realizes for those who know God and put their trust in Him. The idea is to have a personal relationship with God, not just an acquaintance that you wave to as you pass by on the street. Charles Spurgeon said of this verse, “Ignorance is worst when it amounts to ignorance of God, and knowledge is best when it exercises itself upon the name of God.”⁴ David had that personal, intimate relationship with God, exercising that true knowledge of God. Now for us, that relationship is provided to us through Jesus Christ. And the promise remains the same that He will not forsake those who seek Him.

There is motion in the word “seek,” moving towards God. We are told to, “*Seek first the Kingdom of God*” (Matthew 6:33). We are to move forward in our relationship with and trust of God each day. The more we get to know God, the more we trust God and can rest in His provision.

When we realize that God has not forsaken us even in our times of trouble, we can truly praise God and shine the light on Him and not our circumstances. Our focus is transferred from that which is temporary to the Eternal One, the One who never forsakes us.

Our praise becomes a declaration to others. What a wonderful opportunity for our testimony to be a testimony of praise, not based on circumstances but based on the LORD God Almighty.

⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David, Volume 1 Psalms 1-57*; Zondervan Grand Rapids, MI, 1979, p. 98.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The purpose of praise is not intended to make us feel happy inside. The purpose of praise is not based on circumstances being good, comfortable, fun and easy. The purpose of praise is; wait for it, Praise! The word “praise” means to shine the light on an object. The purpose of praise is to shine the light on God.

I have on more than one occasion said to my wife on a cloudy day, “I wish the sun would start shining.” And she always corrects me with her reply, “The sun is always shining.” She, of course, is correct, again. The sun is always shining even on a cloudy day. In that moment I was focused on the grayness of the day, the clouds blocking my perspective of the sun. However, when I stop to think about it, even on the cloudiest and rainiest of days, the sun is shining. It comes down to a matter of perspective. In the same way regardless of circumstances, even in times of trouble, God is shining brightly.

God is protecting and providing for us in big and small ways. God protects and provides for us in times of trouble as well as in times of comfort. God is always shining down on us as He dwells with us, sits with us, dines with us, communes with us. There is fellowship with God on the cloudy days and even during torrential rains; the Light of the World, Jesus the Son of God is still shining.

It is during the times of trouble that God can shape us to where we truly recognize the Purpose of Praise. So, let’s praise the Lord!

AS THE DEER
PANTS FOR THE
WATER BROOKS,
SO MY SOUL
PANTS FOR
YOU, O GOD.

P S A L M 4 2 : 1

PURPOSE

OF THE VALLEY

DATE

August 1-2

WEEK

9 of 10

OVERVIEW

Psalm 42

KEY VERSE

Psalm 42:1

SETTING THE STAGE

Before we dive into this psalm, we first need to acknowledge its author, because the author of this psalm provides us with a unique perspective. The Bible tells us in the superscript of the psalm that the author is the Sons of Korah. Who is Korah? Who are Korah's sons? In the book of Numbers chapter 16, Korah incites the most famous rebellion against God and His leader, Moses. Korah and his co-conspirators faced terrible consequences for their rebellion. Korah's Sons are descendants of Korah, but they do not share his attitude toward God and his leadership. The Sons of Korah are given a unique role of service in the Temple. They are gatekeepers.

What do gatekeepers have to do with valleys in life and why do they have the credibility to speak on this subject? The Sons of Korah were given the prime opportunity to people watch. I do not know about you, but one of my favorite things to do is to watch people. At the airport, at a coffee shop it is entertaining to see all the different people come in and out. If you put your headphones in and not listen to anything, it is beyond belief what people will say around you when they do not think you are listening!

As gatekeepers at the Temple, the Sons of Korah had the opportunity to watch people who are broken by life's circumstances come into the Temple to find restoration and perspective.

Continued on page 62 >

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Growth Occurs in the Valley
2. Battles are Fought and Victories are Won in the Valley
3. The Shepherd is in the Valley

THINGS TO KNOW

- A mountain cannot exist without a valley.
- The Hebrew word for valley is used 53 times in the Old Testament; and only one time in the book of Psalms.¹

PURPOSE

OF THE VALLEY

Setting the Stage, continued >

They would regularly see people walk into the Temple estranged and come out of the Temple restored. They would see people come into the Temple with tears and sorrow only to leave with confidence and assurance in God. The Sons of Korah had a front-row seat to the purpose that can be found in the valleys. It was so important to them that they felt it necessary to write a psalm about it.

Most biblical scholars agree that Psalm 42 and 43 are a unit. The two psalms are glued together by the same refrain throughout them. The Sons of Korah write, “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?*” These psalms have been called “Lament Psalms” because they focus on portraying the deep sorrow and grief that is common throughout the human experience. In our Western mindset, lamenting is a foreign concept. Instead of exposing our grief, sorrow, and worries, we try to bury them in work or in a pint of ice cream. But, in the Ancient Near East lamenting was common. Habakkuk lamented at the coming judgment on Israel. The book of Lamentations is one long lament written by Jeremiah. Jesus Himself lamented in the Garden of Gethsemane because of the coming pain and judgment of the cross. It was not frowned upon to express sorrow. Lamenting was viewed as a beneficial and healthy way to process the valleys of life.

Introduction

On a Sunday in late January, former NBA All-Star Kobe Bryant, was killed along with his daughter Giana and seven others. As the reports were coming in of a helicopter crash in California silence and disbelief swept across this country. Their family and friends were stricken with grief and tears upon hearing this shocking news.

Kobe Bryant was one of the greatest basketball players to ever play the game. An 18-time NBA All-Star and 5-time NBA champion he was without argument one of the most decorated players to ever grace the hardwood. He was not just known for his athletic skills, but he had a great reputation for being an incredible father as well. The unexpected tragedy shook the basketball community. The families, friends, and fans of Kobe, Giana, and the 7 others found themselves in a deep dark valley.

This year our world encountered something that impacted every person regardless of background, language spoken, bank account or belief system. COVID-19 coronavirus hit the world in such a way that individuals, families, businesses, cities, states and countries were suddenly in a deep dark valley.

There are times when the bottom of our lives falls out. We are left grief-stricken with the loss of a loved one. We are paralyzed by fear when we are served with divorce papers. We feel as if we are drowning when we are called into the boss’ office to be laid off. We call these moments of desperation, depression, anxiety and grief: valleys.



¹ biblestudytools.com/lexicon

All of us are familiar with valleys. We have all been in a valley at one point or another in our lives. The difficult question that comes with valleys is not what is happening to me, but why is this happening to me? Frederic Nietzsche once famously said, “He who has a why can endure any how.” While there is a lot of mystery that occurs in the valleys of life, the Bible is clear that Christians can find purpose and hope in the deepest darkest valleys.

Psalm 42 will help us discover the purpose of the valley. Let’s take a look:

PSALM 42:1-6 *As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. ²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God? ³My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” ⁴These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God. With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. ⁵Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence. ⁶O my God, my soul is in despair within me; Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.*

When we typically think of valleys, we naturally think of all the hurt, despondency, and pain that is associated with valleys. But if we look at Scripture even beyond the Psalms, we can find deeper purpose in the valleys of life.

1. GROWTH OCCURS IN THE VALLEY

DEUTERONOMY 8:6-10 *Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. ⁷For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; ⁹a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. ¹⁰When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.*

In the book of Deuteronomy, we find the nation of Israel on the precipice of the Promised Land. They have spent 40 years wandering through the desert, but they are about to come home. God describes the land they are about to enter into as “good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills” (v.7). He deems the land of valleys a good land. In this text, God is talking about literal valleys. But we learn some potent truths when we look at physical valleys and compare them to metaphorical valleys in our lives.

God shows us that growth occurs in the valleys. The land of valleys they were about to enter was a land of tremendous growth. Their valleys were filled with brooks, springs, and rivers which led to fertile soil and an abundance of resources. God describes the land of valleys as a land of wheat and barley, vines, fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey. The Israelites would enter the land of valleys with all the resources they needed to live the life God had called them to live. Tremendous growth happens in the valley. Looking back, we see that it is in the valleys of life that exponential growth has occurred in our lives. While the mountain tops in life are great experiences, we learn less about who we truly are and who God is while on the mountain top. Growth occurs in the valley.

Why does growth tend to happen in our lives most when we are in the valleys? It is because broken hearts are fertile soil for Gospel seeds to take root. When we look at the greatest accounts of life-change throughout Scripture it typically occurs in

Why does growth tend to happen in our lives most when we are in the valleys? It is because broken hearts are fertile soil for Gospel seeds to take root.

people walking through the valleys of life. Abram and Sara were wrestling with infertility. But God showed up in their valley and began to cultivate faith and shaped Abram into Abraham so that he would be the father of Israel. Moses found himself in a deep dark valley in life as a fugitive running from Egypt because of murder. God reached down into the fertile soil of Moses' heart and shaped him into the great leader that could lead an entire nation out of bondage into freedom. Nehemiah found himself in the valley of brokenness over Jerusalem. God used Nehemiah's valley to lead him to action and begin the restorative work on the walls of Jerusalem. All throughout the

It is in the valleys of life where God does great work in us, resulting in great growth.

Gospel accounts, Jesus' miracles took place in the lives of people who were walking through valleys. The lepers walked through the valleys of estrangement. Jairus' was walking through the valley of grief with the loss of his daughter. It is in the valleys of life where God does great work in us, resulting in great growth.

In Psalm 42 the Sons of Korah repeat the phrase, "*Why are you in despair, O my soul?*" They encourage us to take inventory of our own hearts to determine the reason why we are suffering from depression and despair. There certainly can be times of great sadness, grief, and sorrow in life. We desire to know what the reasons are for our inner suffering. But the Sons of Korah do not stop there. They see that knowledge does not change the valley, but hope changes your perspective of the valley. They challenge us to "*Hope in God*" (v.5). Korah's sons give great advice to us because they do not encourage us to hope in a change of circumstances. They do not encourage us to hope in a changing of emotional seasons. They challenge us to hope in God! The word "hope" does not mean ambiguous optimism. Biblical hope is always rooted in assurance in God. During life's valleys, we can be confident that God is doing something in our lives. He is growing us. He is tilling up hardened soil and cultivating spiritual fruit through our circumstances. We can have confidence that our suffering is not in vain. There is purpose in the valley – and it is growth.

Valleys are not only places of great growth; valleys are where battles and victories occur!

2. BATTLES ARE FOUGHT AND VICTORIES ARE WON IN THE VALLEY

When we look throughout the landscape of the Bible, we notice that important battles and victories occur in the valleys. Valleys provide the necessary space and ideal terrain for battles to occur. Perhaps, the most famous battle that took place in Scripture occurs in the Valley of Elah, it is where David fought Goliath (*1 Samuel 17*). For many days the Israelites camped on one side of the valley and the Philistines on the other, as the giant Goliath hurled insults at the people of Israel and the Lord. The Israelites viewed the valley of Elah as a place of hopelessness as they expected to experience great defeat. But that was not the case for David. David found purpose in the valley.

The valleys in life are filled with battles. We battle against insecurity, doubt, anger, and regret.

As David stood before Goliath in the Valley of Elah he realized the valley was a place of opportunity for victory. The Israelites crumbled from fear in the valley when they saw the giant, but David saw a 'giant opportunity' for victory. And with God's help, David seized that opportunity and defeated the giant.

The final battle in this world, the battle of Armageddon will take place in the valley of Megiddo. All the demons, the principalities and Satan himself will gather against God's people in the valley. There has never been and there will never be a more intimidating sight. Yet once again, God will be victorious. He will conquer the enemy and all his satanic forces with His Word. God will be eternally victorious in that valley.

The valleys in life are filled with battles. We battle against insecurity, doubt, anger, and regret. Some of the battles that will rage against us will be battles of spiritual warfare as we wrestle with

Satan and his demons. But it is important to know that we can be victorious in the valleys of life!

Psalm 42 gives us a great key to experiencing victory in the battles that take place during our valley. The sons of Korah write about inner turmoil and the battle that rages within us at times. They paint vivid pictures of depression and sorrow. They write, “*My tears have been my food day and night.*” (v.3) There is intense weeping. “*All Your breakers and Your waves have gone over me.*” (v.7b) There is a sense of being emotionally consumed by your circumstances. They parallel your emotional state to feeling as if you are drowning. They describe a sense of being so overwhelmed that they might even lose their way.

Have you ever been in a whiteout blizzard? For most of us in Texas, the only blizzards that we are familiar with come from Dairy Queen! But in the Great Plains and the Mid-Western States, whiteouts are a common occurrence. The snow fiercely falls impeding your vision and preventing you from normal, day-to-day functions. The snowfall can become so dense and thick at times you cannot see your hand in front of you. Many farmers have died as they ventured out to their barns to take care of their animals in a whiteout. Losing their way in the blizzard, they wander in circles not knowing where to take refuge. Many froze to death, in their own backyard just steps away from their back porch. But over time, the farmers developed a simple but effective tactic to help them navigate their way through the blizzard called “roping off.” At the first sign of a blizzard, farmers take a long rope and attach it to their back door and run it to their barn door. This allows them to venture out into the wintry storm to take care of their animals and find their way back home. The rope serves as a guide for them. It is anchored to their home and provides direction, assurance, and stability when they cannot see.²

In the valleys of life, we can feel like a Great Plains farmer during a whiteout blizzard. Becoming so overwhelmed by our emotions and circumstances that we lose our way home. What the writers of Psalm 42 encourage us to do is to “rope off” our lives. To tie a rope that is anchored to the stability and unchanging nature of God. When life’s blizzards come, and we become disoriented, we can have an assurance that despite an everchanging environment, God does not change! Tethering to God leads to victory in our lives.

The Psalmist writes, “*My soul is cast down within me: therefore I remember you*” (v.6) As Believers in Christ, we have access to timeless universal truths about God and His character that guide us in the midst of valleys. Even though Psalms 42 and 43 display times of despair and displacement, they also showcase deep theological truths that can help us walk through the valleys of life victoriously.

As Believers in Christ, we have access to timeless universal truths about God and His character that guide us in the midst of valleys.

- He is the only One who can quench the thirst of my soul. (*Psalm 42:1*)
- He is worthy to be worshipped. (*Psalm 42:4*)
- He is my salvation. (*Psalm 42:5*)
- He is my God. (*Psalm 42:6*)
- He commands His love to me. (*Psalm 42:8*)
- He sings songs to me in the darkest of nights. (*Psalm 42:8*)
- He is the God of my life. (*Psalm 42:8*)
- He is my Rock. (*Psalm 42:9*)
- He is my Vindicator. (*Psalm 43:1*)
- He is my Defender. (*Psalm 43:1*)

² Illustration taken from Palmer, Parker J. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life: Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2008.

- He is my Strength and Refuge. (*Psalm 43:2*)
- He sends light toward me. (*Psalm 43:3*)
- He sends truth toward me. (*Psalm 43:3*)
- He leads me. (*Psalm 43:3*)
- He is my exceeding joy. (*Psalm 43:4*)

No matter what battle may rage in our soul or the valleys that we walk through in life, if we keep these truths in front of us, we will be victorious. The truth of God will remind us that the valleys we are in are not permanent. As we fix our gaze on God and remember Him, we can endure the valleys and press on to the mountaintops.

We do not just find victory in the valley; we find a much greater prize, the Shepherd.

3. THE SHEPHERD IS IN THE VALLEY

Without a doubt, the most famous scripture passage about valleys occurs in the Twenty-Third Psalm. David writes, “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*” This verse is commonly read at funerals. Often, the pastor reads this to the congregation to provide courage and comfort as they walk through deep dark valleys of grief and sorrow. What is it about this Scripture that provides courage and comfort? David knows that he does not have to fear in the valley of the shadow of death because the Shepherd is there.

As Christians what brings us great courage in the valley is that we are not alone. God is with us.

As Christians what brings us great courage in the valley is that we are not alone. God is with us. We may walk in pain, but God takes every step beside us. In our suffering, He does not abandon us. During our grief, He weeps with us, just like He did at Lazarus’ tomb. In our sorrow, He sympathizes with us. Christians never walk through the valley alone. When everyone else has abandoned us, God has promised to never leave us or forsake us. We know that the Shepherd with the comforting rod and staff that David was referring to in Psalm 23 is Jesus. In the New Testament, Jesus Himself tells us, “*I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep*” (*John 10:11*).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He walks with us through our valleys because He experienced the darkest valley of history. The Good Shepherd laid His life down for the sheep. In His voluntary act of laying His life down for the sheep, He experienced total loneliness. His disciples left Him, and as He took on our sin He was abandoned and forsaken by the Father. Jesus experienced unsurpassed pain and heartache on the cross. He cried tears of agony. He unjustly received the wrath of God. He was publicly shamed, mocked and ridiculed. He died a death He did not deserve. The Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep. He experienced total abandonment so that we would never have to experience it. He received the wrath of God so that we would never endure it. He was publicly mocked so that we would be eternally accepted as children of God. Jesus is our Good Shepherd who walked through the valley of the shadow of death, all the way to the cross so that we could find purpose in our valleys.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Jerry Sittser is a Christian author and professor. He has written some incredible books, but none more powerful than his testimony of walking through the valley. In *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*, Sittser recalls a traumatic car accident that he was involved in that took the life of his wife, mother and daughter. He was broken and grief-stricken. Sittser wrote this book to document his grief process and to recount how God gave him purpose in the valley. He writes, “The experience of loss does not have to be the defining moment in our lives. Instead, the defining moment can be our response to the loss. It is not what happens to us that matters so much as what happens in us.”³ The valleys we find ourselves in can be paralyzing, but God can use them to give us purpose in life.

If you find yourself walking through the valley in life you can be confident that God wants to use that valley to produce growth in your life. While we may find the valley to be a tempting place to abandon faith in God we must be vigilant to hold our faith in God. Jerry Bridges writes, “Trust is not a passive state of mind. It is a vigorous act of the soul by which we choose to lay hold on the promises of God and cling to them despite the adversity that at times seeks to overwhelm us.”⁴

The valley that you are in may look like a battlefield now, but God wants you to walk through it victoriously. In the darkest valleys we can rest assured that we do not have to fear because the Good Shepherd is walking with us every step of our way, giving purpose to our pain.

It is in the valley that we become like the deer panting for water. Psalm 42:1 “*As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God.*” We can be confident that God will satisfy our thirst in the midst of the valley, as His plan continues to shape our purpose.

³ Sittser, Gerald Lawson. *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*. Vereeniging: Christian Art, 2011.

⁴ Bridges, Jerry. *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Nav Press, 2008) 214.

HE HAS MADE
EVERYTHING
APPROPRIATE
IN ITS TIME. HE
HAS ALSO SET
ETERNITY IN
THEIR HEART.

ECCLESIASTES 3:11A

PURPOSE

OF THE HEART

DATE

August 8-9

WEEK

10 of 10

OVERVIEW

Ecclesiastes 3

KEY VERSE

Ecclesiastes 3:11a

SETTING THE STAGE

Throughout the summer we have looked at the Story of Purpose as it pertained to various aspects of life. In Ecclesiastes 3 Solomon writes about the extremes of life reminding the reader that there is a purpose to everything under heaven. We have looked at the purpose of different things over the last few months. Whether we are looking at the purpose of work, home, community, freedom, or valleys, it all comes down to the heart of the matter.

The heart is the most vital of all physical organs as it pumps blood to the entire body. Without the heart doing what it is designed to do, the other organs in the body have no chance of accomplishing their purpose. The purpose of the heart is to give life to the body. If the heart does not fulfill its purpose; if the blood ceases to be pumped throughout the body the result is death.

The heart is just as important in the spiritual side of life. We are to love the Lord with all of our heart. The heart is the core of our being both physically and spiritually. Proverbs 4:23 says, *“Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”* Solomon realized the importance and significance of the heart both physically and spiritually. The heart represents life. The physical heart represents that which is temporary. The spiritual heart represents that which is eternal. In the passage today we will see that when all is said and done, it all comes down to the heart of the matter and the matter of the heart.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Purpose of the Heart in the Past
2. The Purpose of the Heart in the Future
3. The Purpose of the Heart in the Present

THINGS TO KNOW

- People tend to follow their hearts spiritually, emotionally and physically.
- Jesus said, *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Matthew 6:21).

PURPOSE

OF THE HEART

Introduction

If you read through a book on leadership or business, there is typically a section in the book that talks about the vision of the leader and the purpose of the business. If we are honest, most of us want to read the secrets of vision but we skim through the chapter on purpose. We attribute the practical “secrets” of someone’s leadership or the magic of a company’s business success to what they do. We want to read about their unique selling point, how they saw around the bend to corner the market, or the timely business connection that they made at a networking dinner. Rarely do we desire to read about the why and their purpose. But if you were to sit down with any great leader, businessperson, or entrepreneur they will tell you the most impactful thing in their life is the purpose, the why they do what they do.

The purpose of the company or business is what ultimately drove that leader to develop a unique selling point. Purpose motivated the long hours to research the market for them to predict what was coming around the bend. Without purpose, the methods would be impotent and the strategies would be ineffective. Knowing your purpose dictates what you do, how you do it and what sets you apart from the competition.

This does not just affect the business world but the importance of purpose sweeps across every arena in life. Purpose convinces new moms to push through new levels of exhaustion. Purpose drives the man on the treadmill to run an extra mile. Purpose motivates the missionary to leave his home and risk his life to share the Good News. Purpose drives the medical school student to wake up early and study just a little bit more because someone’s life might depend on it. Purpose leads the elementary school teacher to spend extra time and extra money developing her lesson plans because the future generation depends on that educational experience. Purpose dictates what you do and how you do, life.

In the spiritual realm, understanding purpose transforms our devotional life. In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney writes, “discipline without direction is drudgery.”¹ When we understand the purpose behind spiritual disciplines it changes our mindset from mere duty to devotion. Knowing the purpose of prayer revamps our understanding of the task. It changes prayer from talking to God to being with God. Knowing the purpose of reading God’s Word, changes our mindset. We no longer view it as reading through a checklist, but as a way to know the heart and mind of the Living God.

Today as we look at the book of Ecclesiastes we will see what God’s Word has to say about the purpose of our hearts. God as Divine Author chooses to show us our purpose, not in specific narrow corridors; instead, He paints broad strokes to cover the purpose of every human heart that has ever beat. When we think of our heart, we typically think of the muscle in our chest that pumps blood to our body. Perhaps when we hear the word “heart” we think about our emotions,



¹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Nav Press, 1991.

predominantly love. When the Bible mentions the heart it typically is referring to the entirety of a person; the seat of the mind, will and emotions. It encompasses the totality of a person's life.² What we are going to discover in the book of Ecclesiastes today, is God's purpose for our whole life is placed in our hearts.

God uses the human author, Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, outside of the Lord Jesus Christ, to unpack the purpose of the heart most uniquely, through the lens of time. When Billy Graham was 64 years old, somebody asked him, "What is the greatest surprise in your life?" Dr. Graham responded so poignantly, "The brevity of life." Time has a way of passing quickly, but as it passes it profoundly reveals purpose.

Let us look at Ecclesiastes 3.

1. THE PURPOSE OF THE HEART IN THE PAST

ECCLESIASTES 3:11A *He has made everything beautiful in its time.*

One of my favorite apps right now is Google Photos. I like it because it protects all my pictures by uploading them to "the cloud," automatically. This photo app is eerily smart, it will let you search through your photos for just about anything. You can look for a particular individual. You can search by location to pull up a trip that you took this past year. You can search for flowers or all of your food pictures. You can even search for those pointless firework pictures you take on the fourth of July and New Year's Eve. It's remarkable! One of my favorite features in the app is "Rediscover This Day." The app searches through your photos over the past several years on that date and pulls up all the photos. There is something beautiful about looking back and reflecting on what God in His providence has led you **through** as well as what He has led you **to**.

One of the reasons we are nostalgic is because when we look at the past, we have a better understanding of how the Lord has taken the tattered threads of our lives, and masterfully woven them into a beautiful tapestry of His grace. We can agree with Solomon and look back at the past and say, "*He has made everything beautiful in its time*" (Ecclesiastes 3:11a). For the Christian, reflecting back on our journey is not an exercise to pat ourselves on the back and applaud our own resolve, strength, and creativity. When we reflect on our journey, we should pause in awe of how good God has been to us.

Our hearts emotionally have the unique ability to recall the past and find a deep purpose. When we were going through difficulties, heartache, and pain we often perceived them as stumbling blocks to where we wanted to be. We viewed the difficulty as an obstacle that impeded our progress. Reflecting on the past confirms that God was not using our difficulties as stumbling blocks but as stepping stones to where He wanted us to be. What we thought of as obstacles that were impeding our progress turned out to be opportunities for personal growth to take place.

Reflecting on the past confirms that God was not using our difficulties as stumbling blocks but as stepping stones to where He wanted us to be.

Standing in awe of the hand of God shaping the purpose of our past is not a difficult concept for us to grasp, because it is familiar, and we often do it. Solomon moves to a much more difficult realm of purpose regarding our future. He transitions from reflecting on past experiences to investing in eternity.

² William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words*. Zondervan, 2006.

2. THE PURPOSE OF THE HEART IN THE FUTURE

ECCLESIASTES 3:11B *Also, He has put eternity into man's heart.*

The “General Social Survey” questions 50,000 people in America and asks questions about religious preference and life after death. In 2014, the results showed that 80 percent of the people surveyed said they believe in life after death.⁴ Yet we know from day to day conversations that many are asking the question: what will happen to me when I die? What will eternity hold for me? Solomon tells us that God has put eternity into man's heart, and even Believers wonder exactly what happens after we take our last breath. Eternity for those who trust in Jesus brings the thought of great comfort, but for those who have not trusted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, it brings great anxiety. Puritan Pastor, Thomas Watson said, “Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset, eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise.”⁵

Weddings illustrate the great anticipation of what Christians will find in eternity. On January 14, 1632, Samuel Rutherford wrote a profound letter drawing close parallels between the Christian's anticipation for Heaven and a bride's anticipation on her wedding day. He writes, “Our love to [Christ] should begin on earth, as it shall be in heaven; for the bride taketh not by a thousand degrees so much delight in her wedding garment, as she doth in her bridegroom.” No matter how beautiful the bride's dress might be she does not walk down the aisle gazing at her dress; instead, she sets her gaze toward her groom. For Christians, this is the reality that we live in. As we walk through this present world, we set our gaze toward our Heavenly Groom in eternity.⁶

The purpose of our heart is eternal. Everything that we do as Believers should be done considering eternity.

The purpose of our heart is eternal. Everything that we do as Believers should be done considering eternity. Life on earth is brief, yet eternity can be determined by the decisions we choose to make in this life. When we recognize this incredible truth, it re-purposes how we spend our time. Eternity is too long and too permanent to be wrapped up in surface-level pleasantries. The weight of eternity moves us to ask probing questions and to exhort others to live for Christ. The weight of eternity in our hearts drives us to love others deeply. Eternity re-purposes our finances. Investing in eternity prevents us from being wasteful with the resources God has given us. Instead, eternity urges us to invest in advancing the Kingdom of God, to wring every drop of our finances to spread the Good News of Christ, and to point others to God's glory with our lives.

Christians are to live with an eternal focus. Everything we do should filter through the lens of “how will eternity be impacted” by our lives. The Apostle Paul writes to the Church at Corinth encouraging them to endure the temporal for the sake of the eternal. He writes to them saying,

2 CORINTHIANS 4:17-18 *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (ESV)*

⁴ Maggie Fox, “Fewer Americans Believe in God - Yet They Still Believe in Afterlife,” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 10 Feb. 2017, www.nbcnews.com/better/wellness/fewer-americans-believe-god-yet-they-still-believe-afterlife.

⁵ Martin H Manser, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 93.

⁶ John Tweeddale, “Eternity in Our Hearts.” *Tabletalk*, Ligonier, 17 Sept. 2018, tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2018/09/eternity-in-our-hearts/.

Living for eternity does not promise a life of comfort. In fact, Paul calls it affliction. But it does promise great value!

Jonathan Edwards famously said, “Lord, stamp eternity on my eyeballs!” His prayer is that he would be conscious of the reality of eternity and his life would be impacted by its weight. God has purposed our hearts to live considering eternity. We are like the bride walking down the aisle on her wedding day, not caught up with her garments but focused on her future with the groom who pledges his love to her.

3. THE PURPOSE OF THE HEART IN THE PRESENT

ECCLESIASTES 3:11-13 *Yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them to be joyful and do good as long as they live; also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil – this is God’s gift to man.*

Solomon tells us that our hearts should rejoice in God’s work in the past. He tells us that we should live with a sense of purpose for the future and then he moves to what we should do in the present. Solomon tells us that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil — this is God’s gift to man. In the Creation narrative, as God looked at His creation repeatedly, He stepped back and declared it “good.” God looked at all His toil and work and enjoyed it. Since we are made in the image of God, we have the unique ability to enjoy our lives. To take pleasure in the present. This is one of the distinguishing factors of humanity: the ability to enjoy the richness of life.

When the well-known British preacher, William Sangster was diagnosed with progressive muscular atrophy and could not get well, he made four resolutions for the rest of his life:

- I will never complain.
- I will keep the home bright.
- I will count my blessings.
- I will try to turn my disease to gain.⁷

Sangster’s goal was not to be positive for the sake of being positive but to focus on all the good gifts that God allowed him to receive, despite his disease. These are all practices that each of us can put into place daily. We recognize that everything we possess in life is “God’s gift to man.” Often, we do not enjoy the life we have, because we believe that we deserve to have a better life. But the message of the Bible tells us that what we truly deserve is hell and death (*Ephesians 2:1-3*). Anything a degree better than Hell is a gift of God’s grace and we should enjoy it. The Book of James tells us that “*every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*” (*James 1:17, ESV*).

This is so antithetical to the way our culture thinks about life. So many people view their life as a purposeless grind. They go throughout their week miserable and moping like a human Eeyore, pessimistic and characterized as gloomy. Work is a grind. Family is a grind. Our spouse is a grind. Keeping up with friends is a grind. The message of this chapter in Ecclesiastes is that life is not a grind, it is a gift from God. If Christians are going to represent Christ to the world, they cannot go throughout life like Eeyore and expect to

If Christians are going to represent Christ to the world, they cannot go throughout life like Eeyore and expect to draw people into the Kingdom of God.

⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied: Looking for the Answer to the Meaning of Life: OT Commentary, Ecclesiastes*. David C Cook, 2010, p. 56.

draw people into the Kingdom of God. The world does not need to see Christians who view God's purpose for their life as enduring the misery of the grind. The world needs to see Christians who are enjoying the wonder of God's gifts.

We get to enjoy the taste of hot coffee in the morning. We get to enjoy a cotton candy colored sky as the sun rolls down in the evening. We get to enjoy the company of our family. We get to enjoy our health. God has given us the gift of our jobs as a means of provision in life and we should enjoy that. We live in a segment of history where we have access to more information at our fingertips than at any other time, we should enjoy that. Every hug we receive, each smile that is given, every meal that is served is a gift from the kind and generous heart of our Heavenly Father.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The Book of Ecclesiastes shows us that without God at the center of our lives, life is meaningless. It is vanity. Throughout the book, Solomon compares life to trying to catch the wind. But God transforms a vain life into a life of purpose. With Christ at the center of our lives, the past is not merely a series of events that happened to us. The past is an archive of God's grace toward us. We see that with Him nothing is wasted. The broken pieces are transformed into a beautiful purpose.

When we commit our plans to the Lord and keep ourselves fixed on eternity the future is not daunting, it is exhilarating! To know that everything we do in this life can reap dividends in eternity brings joy. It is refreshing to know that God's love toward His children allows us to enjoy life. Our heart's purpose is to be in awe of God. To fear God and keep His commandments is the whole duty of man (*Ecclesiastes 12:13*).

The Westminster Shorter Catechism was written in 1648 to teach new converts to the Christian faith core truths about Christianity. The Catechism is a tool that asks questions and gives biblical answers to the questions. The beginning of the Catechism asks the question, "What is the chief end of man?" It succinctly answers "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever and ever." Eternity has been placed in our hearts, giving us purpose each day and for all the tomorrows.

THE STORY OF **PURPOSE**

PURPOSE OF WISDOM
PURPOSE OF WORK
PURPOSE OF THE HOME
PURPOSE OF WORDS
PURPOSE OF FREEDOM
PURPOSE OF GOD'S WAY
PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY
PURPOSE OF PRAISE
PURPOSE OF THE VALLEY
PURPOSE OF THE HEART



COMING UP NEXT:

THE STORY OF **CHRIST:**
IN HIS OWN WORDS

