

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD Trusting God

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

Wisdom Has Its Limits

The book of Proverbs is summarized by one word: *wisdom*. Not only is this evident from a quick read-through of its contents, but it is directly stated in the book’s purpose statement: “To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, to receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity; to give prudence to the naive, to the youth knowledge and discretion” (1:2-4).

What is wisdom? Tremper Longman (*How to Read Proverbs*, 14-15) defines it as follows:

Wisdom is the skill of living. It is a practical knowledge that helps one know how to act and how to speak in different situations. Wisdom entails the ability to avoid problems, and the skill to handle them when they present themselves. Wisdom also includes the ability to interpret other people’s speech and writing in order to react correctly to what they are saying to us.

J. I. Packer summarizes it even more concisely: wisdom is “**the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it**” (*Knowing God*, 90). In other words, the place which Proverbs occupies in God’s special revelation is that it provides unique instruction on *the skill of living*, to teach its readers about how to walk successfully in the world outside the innocence of the Garden of Eden—a world that is stained by sin and filled with folly. In response to this instruction, the man who fears God has one responsibility: *to practice what it teaches*. This is the path of true success (19:16; see also 1:7; 6:23; 9:10; 13:13; 14:26-27; 16:20; 23:17; 28:9; 30:5-6).

But how must the God-fearer respond to the *unknown*? After all, “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter” (25:1), and since “man’s steps are ordained by the LORD” and not by man himself, “how then can man understand his way?” (20:24). How is the God-fearer to walk when God’s mysterious providence suspends the law of cause-and-effect, introduces pain into his path, and orchestrates consequences seemingly disconnected from wisdom’s assurances—as He did with Job? How is the God-fearer to walk when he suffers injustice, when his children reject his counsel, when his health fails, when his wealth is destroyed, and when God’s promises seem not to be fulfilled? How is he to deal with disappointment?

- **18:14** – “The spirit of a man can endure his sickness, but *as for* a broken spirit who can bear it?”
- **12:25a; 13:12a; 14:10, 13; 15:13; 17:22, 25**

The wisdom Proverbs conveys will not solve all the God-fearer’s problems, for it brings neither omnipotence (infinite power) nor omniscience (infinite understanding). As J. I. Packer notes, “wisdom can be frustrated by circumstantial factors outside the wise person’s control” (*Knowing God*, 91).

Therefore, **the child of God must possess one very important virtue in addition to wisdom itself: trust**. The supreme importance of this virtue is communicated in what has become the most well-known proverb of the book:

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

So foundational is *trusting God* that commentator Charles Bridges called it “the polar star of a child of God—faith in his Father’s providence, promises, and grace” (*Proverbs*, 25). By studying the whole of Proverbs, **six principles arise related to trusting God**.

1. Trusting God accepts that He is sovereign.

Jerry Bridges sums up the issue concisely: “If we are to trust God, we must learn to see that He is continuously at work in every aspect and every moment of our lives” (*Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*, 12).

Seeing God in this way requires a man to embrace the doctrine of God’s sovereignty without reservation, and this is exactly what Proverbs emphasizes. In contrast to the notion of **chance** (the belief that there is no rational power ruling the universe), **fate** (the belief that there is no benevolent power ruling the universe), **pantheism** (the belief that everything is God, even evil), **dualism** (the belief that there are two equal powers in the universe, one good and one bad), and **deism** (the belief that God has separated himself from the universe), Proverbs teaches that **the world and everything in it is ruled by an absolutely free, rational, personal, transcendent, and all-powerful God whose plans cannot be thwarted by anything or anyone outside of Himself**. Even the existence of the evil that makes this world treacherous is no surprise to or challenge for God. Even its existence will serve His purposes.

- **16:4** – “The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.”

The truth about God’s sovereignty is most basically illustrated by Proverbs’ emphasis on God as **Creator**. He is sovereign because He Himself brought everything into existence by power and wisdom, He owns and sustains it all, and He is completely distinct from it.

- **3:19-20** – “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens. By His knowledge the deeps were broken up and the skies drip with dew.”
- **8:22-31; 14:31; 15:11; 17:5; 20:12; 22:2; 29:13**

Bruce Waltke states, “All these texts refer to the LORD as Creator—none speaks of creation apart from his activity, and all assume that he is the sole, sovereign Creator” (*Proverbs 1-15*, 68). Therefore, because He is the Maker and Sustainer, all that occurs in time and space is under His exacting control.

- **16:9** – “The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.”
- **21:1** – “The king’s heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.”
- **16:33; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30, 31**

The wisdom of Proverbs—like the wisdom of Job—is not focused on explaining *why* there is foolishness and suffering in the world. Rather, the emphasis of Proverbs is simply *that* the God-fearing man must *humble himself* and *trust* in God’s absolute control over all. Agur acknowledges this when he writes,

- **30:2-4** – “Surely I am more stupid than any man, and I do not have the understanding of a man. Neither have I learned wisdom, nor do I have the knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended into heaven and descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has wrapped the waters in His garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name or His son’s name? Surely you know!”

2. Trusting God acknowledges one’s own finitude and fallenness.

Proverbs also emphasizes that essential to trusting God is the accurate recognition of one’s condition. The child of God must admit the fallibility of his “own understanding” of the very circumstances which confuse him, and that his “own eyes” do not see reality accurately. Trusting God is the only reasonable option, because to trust in anything else—especially self—spells disappointment and disaster.

- **3:5-8** – “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones.”
- **14:12** – “There is a way *which seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”
- **12:15; 16:5, 25; 21:2; 28:26; 30:2-4**

Trusting God requires *humility*—the sincere and unqualified confession that in the midst of difficulty “I do not have understanding” (30:2). It is the epitome of pride to shake one’s fist at God and charge Him with wrongdoing or demand that He answer for His actions. It is humility which overcomes this fear, anger, and anxiety and considers it “sweet” simply to rest God’s hands.

3. Trusting God affirms that He is faithful and good.

Although Proverbs teaches that God is sovereign and that man’s understanding of what was right and best for him is skewed by his limited and errant understanding, it nonetheless holds out great hope. Man can trust in this sovereign God because He is good and cares for those who turn to him in need. **God is not only transcendent (sovereign); He is also immanent (attentive).**

- **3:5-6** – “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”
- **20:22** – “Do not say, “I will repay evil”; wait for the LORD, and He will save you.”
- **3:11-12; 15:8, 29**

Many of life’s hardships can be attributed to the Lord’s work of purification. The heat He applies to burn away the dross in our lives is painful, but the result it produces is beautiful. What we often attribute to God’s indifference or unkindness is, in reality, the tender application of His love.

Trusting God requires looking upon all our painful circumstances as the actions a loving God who delights in His children and desires to make them glorious. He is the Father who administers the bitter medicine which alone can cure the ailments of our hearts. Take the medicine. He is good and faithful.

4. Trusting God admits that He is wise.

Some might secretly believe that although God is sovereign (#1 above) and good (#3 above), He still does not know *the best way* to accomplish His purposes in our lives. Even if they do not admit to this conviction, they nonetheless affirm it by their attitude and action.

Proverbs annuls this argument by emphasizing God’s infinite, absolute wisdom. He is the ultimate origin and practitioner of anything duly called “wisdom.” He always and only knows what is best.

- **2:6-8** – “For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; *He is* a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, and He preserves the way of His godly ones.”
- **3:19-20; 8:22-23; 29:30**

As the standard and source of man’s wisdom, God’s wisdom can be defined as “consisting in the selection of the best end of action, and the adoption of the best means for the accomplishment of this end” (J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 87). In other words, **“God is infinitely wise, because he selects the best possible end of action ... [and] because he adopts the best possible means for the accomplishment of the end which he has in view”** (Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 87).

Such wisdom is not abstract or impersonal. It is based on God’s intricate knowledge of each man: **5:3, 11, 21; 16:2; 21:2; 24:12.**

Consequently, since every man's steps are individually ordained by this all-wise, all-knowing God (20:24), there must be on the part of the God-fearer *total trust* that God knows "the selection of the best end of action, and the adoption of the best means for the accomplishment of this end" for his own life. Indeed, God's ways are *inscrutable*, but when the child of God responds with the full conviction that God will always do what is wisest for his own life, he will experience a peace that passes understanding.

Trusting God requires putting away the attitude that "I know what's best for my life." It requires adopting the attitude that says, "My particular circumstances are the very best course of action for God to accomplish His purposes in my life. It is best that these decisions are in His hands."

5. Trusting God asserts that He is just.

Proverbs teaches that in God's timing, He will ensure that justice will be the end result of all our experiences (see "Pursuing Justice, Part 2," 4/28/2021). If our sorrows have come as the result of the injustices of others, He will bring vindication. If we have been faithful to His word, He will reward. Therefore, we are to trust Him. We are not to seek vengeance nor despair that God will forget.

- **11:18-19** – "The wicked earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness *gets* a true reward. He who is steadfast in righteousness *will attain* to life, and he who pursues evil *will bring about* his own death."
- **2:6-8; 3:33; 10:16; 11:21; 19:17; 20:22; 22:12; 24:12; 23:10-11; 29:26**

Trusting God requires the precious ability to see life beyond the immediate circumstances. It requires the God-fearer to live life now in light of what has been promised to him in the future.

6. Trusting God awards blessing.

Proverbs teaches that a life lived in full submission to God's agenda—whatever it may be—will experience a peace, stability, and contentment that passes human understanding.

- **3:5-8** – "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones."
- **19:23** – "The fear of the LORD *leads* to life, so that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil."
- **14:26-27; 16:20; 22:4; 23:17-18; 28:14, 25**

This is to be contrasted with the result that comes when trust ("fear") is placed in other things: **11:28; 18:10-11; 29:25.**

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day until the end of the month. Memorize Prov 3:5-6.
- Why must "trust in God" occupy such an important role in the believer's life?
- Identify the primary circumstances in your life which pose the greatest challenge to trusting in God. What is it about these circumstances that cause you question God's character? What must you do to mortify this doubt in God?
- Which of God's attributes discussed above brings greatest comfort to you in your difficulties?
- As a model for prayer, Jesus taught us to pray to the Father, "your will be done" (Matt 6:10). Is this your consistent response to the circumstances you encounter? How can you pray better for His will?

Recommended Reading: Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*. NavPress, 2017. 368pp.

Audio & Notes: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: May 26 – Spring Fellowship