

September 1, 2019 by Steve Brandon



The Blessings of Wisdom

Proverbs 3:1-10

- 1. Listen for a Long Life (verses 1-2)**
- 2. Be Faithful for Favor (verses 3-4)**
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One of the most dangerous and harmful teachings under the cover of the church is that of the “health, wealth, and prosperity gospel.” This teaching says that if you believe in Jesus, then you will experience health and long life. If you believe in Jesus, then you will have riches and prosperity and experience all of the high living that goes with it: houses, cars, planes, exotic vacations!

It goes like this: if your faith is large enough, God will reward you with all sorts of blessings. You will live a life free of sickness. You will have success in all of your dealings. As you give to the church, God will return it back to you in abundance.

Now, I say that this is one of the most harmful teachings for a reason. It has hurt many, many people. This teaching has especially ravaged Africa. The health, wealth, and prosperity message from America has traveled there, and in impoverished nations people flock to it, thinking that they are going to receive these things. Many in Africa have left this teaching disillusioned.

This teaching is hurtful, because when sickness comes, it leads to doubt and discouragement and questioning of one’s faith. I have heard of those who are sick and in the hospital, visited by those who believe this doctrine. Rather than being comforted in their time of illness, they are confronted by their lack of faith. But this is not what people need when in the hospital. When people are hurting in their body, they need to be helped in their soul, not harassed.

I have also heard of those who have given sacrificially, believing that God will reward them in return. I remember speaking with a pastor friend of mine who went to seminary the same time that I did. He was pastoring a church about a mile from a very large church that taught health, wealth, and prosperity to all who have enough faith in Jesus. My pastor friend told me of one of the members of his church: a single mother who used to attend the large church in town. The church was going through a large building program and was pressing people to believe that if they gave to the building, God would return anything they gave. This woman, living on a low income, believed the message and mortgaged her small house to give tens of thousands of dollars to the church’s building program.

She never saw any return for her sacrifice. All she saw was poverty, as she lost all her equity in her home and became dependent upon the government. To make matters worse, the church was unwilling to help her financially, even though out of her poverty she had given sacrificially to build their huge building. All they would do was tell her to continue to give and believe that God would repay her. Disillusioned, she finally found her way to my friend’s church, where they sought to help her out of her poor decisions. It is really very sad to see.

This is the sort of devastation that comes in the wake of the “health, wealth, and prosperity gospel.” The reality is that the only people who get rich are the pastors and others who happen to be in on the scheme. The reality is that many people leave disillusioned when hardships come.

This is nothing new to our day and age. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day were much the same as those who peddle this false gospel today. They were in it for their own good. Jesus condemned them:

Mark 12:38-40

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

I believe this same condemnation will come upon the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers today.

Now, one of the greatest problems with this teaching is that it fails to account for the many times that Scripture speaks of the hardships that come upon God’s people. Think about Joseph. His slavery and imprisonment were not due to his sin. At one point, he even fled the temptation of Potiphar’s wife, only to have her lie about him and cause her husband to cast him into prison. Righteousness brought him suffering, not prosperity. Think about Job. He was a righteous man who lost it all. He did not suffer the loss of his family and health because of his sin. Scripture’s testimony of Job is that he was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1). Think about David. Not all of the trials in his life came because of his sin or lack of faith. In Psalm 18, he speaks of his distress and his need of help from the LORD (Psalm 18:4-6). Yet in the same Psalm he calls himself “righteous” and “blameless” (Psalm 18:20-24).

God’s people have never been exempt from suffering and sickness. On the contrary, Paul says that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus himself promised his disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). Our consolation is that Jesus overcame the world and that we find our peace in him (John 16:33).

Those who preach health, wealth, and prosperity plain get it wrong. Even if people think about Jesus himself, they will see how wrong this teaching is. Of all people, Jesus was the supreme example of righteousness. Paul and Peter and John all tell us that he never sinned (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5; Hebrews 4:15). Of anyone who ever walked the planet, Jesus alone was sinless, because he was holy God in the flesh. And yet of all people in the world, none suffered as much as Jesus. He endured the most physically painful death imaginable.

Do you know what the word “excruciating” means? It comes from the Latin *ex cruce*, meaning “out of the cross.” Excruciating pain is pain like that of the cross. That is where we get the word. That is how much he suffered.

Further, he experienced the full wrath of God for our sins: “For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Our hope in this life is not that our faith is large enough for us to know health, wealth, and prosperity today. Our hope is that Jesus died for our sins and has prepared a place of joy for us for all eternity with him. This is the true gospel: not health, wealth, and prosperity in this life, but eternal life in the ages to come. And to get there will mean suffering for God’s people. The Bible speaks of suffering now, but glory later. Read 1 Peter if you have any doubts. Paul and Barnabas told the early church that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Jesus said that “any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). The health, wealth, and prosperity preachers are silent when it comes to these themes, which are clear in Scripture.

Now, having said all that, we could be guilty of the same extreme. We could focus so heavily upon the suffering passages that we miss the passages that speak of the blessings that come to God’s people, because the Bible is full of promises of blessing that come to those who trust in the LORD with all of their hearts. None of those passages are as clear and overt as our passage this morning: Proverbs, chapter 3.

I invite you to open your Bibles to Proverbs, chapter 3, found on page 528. The title of my message this morning is “The Blessings of Wisdom,” because that is what we see in Proverbs 3: the blessings that come to all who walk in wisdom. This chapter is probably one of the favorites of those who preach health, wealth, and prosperity, because in it we see promises of health, wealth, and prosperity. Look for those promises as I read:

Proverbs 3:1-10

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,
for length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.
Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good success
in the sight of God and man.
Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.
Honor the LORD with your wealth
and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Did you see the promises of health, wealth, and prosperity? The promise of health comes in verse 2: “for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.” The promise of prosperity comes in verse 4: “So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.” The promise of wealth comes in verse 10: “then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”

Our text this morning promises health, wealth, and prosperity to all who find wisdom. So at Rock Valley Bible Church, let’s not back away from these claims. Let’s lean in! Let’s realize that following the LORD in the ways of wisdom will bring great blessing in our lives.

Now, before we dig into our text, I want to point out that Proverbs 3 is not preaching the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel. That gospel says that if you believe enough, these things will be given to you. But Proverbs 3 does not say “if you believe enough.” It says, if you walk in God’s ways, these things will come upon your lives. In other words, Proverbs 3 acts more like a principle of life than a blessing of faith. The blessings of Proverbs 3 do not come upon you by believing the right things as much as by living the right way.

Think of Newton’s laws. Objects with mass tend to pull toward one another. Drop an apple, and it will fall. These are laws of how God has made this world to work. Similarly, these blessings are like laws of life. Live this way, and this is the flavor of blessing you can expect. We also need to remember that these are poetry, not absolute guarantees. It is not that if you do this, then absolutely this will happen. It is more that if this is the flavor of your life, this is the flavor of blessing you might expect.

So let’s dig in. In verses 1-12, we see six statements of blessing.

1. Listen for a Long Life (verses 1-2)

Proverbs 3:1-2

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,
for length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.

The exhortation here is familiar. It is an exhortation to listen to the instruction of your parents. We saw it in chapter 1 and verse 8: "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching." We saw it in chapter 2 and verse 1: "My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you." We will hear it again in chapter 4 and chapter 5. Proverbs exhorts us over and over to heed the counsel of our parents. Young people, this is especially for you. Are you listening to them?

I know that sometimes children can get into the habit of not listening to their parents. I know from experience, both as a parent and remembering my own childhood, that there are really three ways children respond to their parents. First, ignoring. A parent says something, gives instruction or asks something, and it is as if the sound waves just went nowhere. My ears don't work. What did you say? Second, complaining. When a parent gives an instruction, the child complains back, argues, fights against it. Can you clean your room? Oh, why do I always have to clean my room? Maybe they obey, but with a grumbling, complaining attitude. And third, resisting. An outright act of fighting against what the parents say. When a parent tells a child to do something they do not want to do, the boxing gloves go on.

Such are the ways of foolishness. But the Proverbs over and over again tell young people to listen to their parents, and it brings blessing. Verse 2 says it brings health and peace: "for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you."

If you obey your parents, you can expect a long life. Have you ever heard that before? This sounds just like the fifth commandment. Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). In Ephesians 6, Paul points out that this is the first commandment with a promise. How simple can that be? Obey your parents, and your life will be long.

Now, like all proverbs, this is no absolute guarantee. There have been plenty of obedient children who have died in their youth, from leukemia, or a car accident, or drowning. This is not an absolute promise, but a guideline. To be sure, many children have died because they were disobedient to their parents and gone off to do their own thing. In general, as you listen to your parents, you will live in a circle of safety.

I remember seeing a diagram in Tedd Tripp's excellent book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*. In it was a circle with a child in it, called "The Circle of Safety." When the child is inside the circle, there is protection. When the child is outside the circle, the child is in danger. The child is inside the circle when honoring and obeying their parents. The child moves outside the circle when they dishonor and disobey. Discipline and correction help to bring them back inside. Children, you want to be in that circle. Because outside the circle are shark-infested waters, and you do not want to be there.^[1]

This is the picture of verses 1 and 2: as children listen to their parents, they will experience blessing, particularly long life and peace.

2. Be Faithful for Favor (verses 3-4)

Proverbs 3:3-4

Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good success
in the sight of God and man.

The key words in verse 3 are "steadfast love" and "faithfulness." They both speak of a long-enduring reliability. Steadfast love is the loyal love that never wavers. Through thick and thin, this love is always there. Faithfulness is the enduring quality of loyalty. Through ups and downs, faithfulness will provide support. Practically, this means things like: show up on time, do what you promise, make the phone call in times of trouble, be ready at all times, be dependable, be loyal.

We all know what it is like when people are not like this. "Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him" (Proverbs 10:26). The unfaithful man is an irritant. You send him out to do his task and he fails. It is disappointing and discouraging. Solomon is telling his son to be trustworthy.

The result of those who are loyal and faithful is found in verse 4: "So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man." Any employer loves the worker who shows up on time and does what is expected. In fact, in many jobs, especially jobs for young people, this is about all that is needed: to get there on time and do what is required. You do that, and your boss will love you. To use the language of verse 4, you will have favor in the sight of your boss. You will find good success in your work. You will stay employed. You will be first in line for a raise.

But verse 4 is not merely talking about finding favor in the eyes of others. It is also talking about the LORD. Faithful dependability is precious in God's sight as well: "So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man." Ultimately, is that not what we want? Favor and success in God's eyes? I guarantee you that when you stand before the Lord and give an account for your life, the words you most want to hear are these: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:23).

3. Be Dependent for Direction (verses 5-6)

Proverbs 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 straight your paths.

Of all the verses in Proverbs, perhaps there are none more beloved than these. They paint the picture of a godly life in such a wonderful way: trusting in the Lord, leaning on him, acknowledging him, and experiencing his guidance in life.

It is at this point where we see wisdom transcend this life, realizing that true wisdom is walking with the LORD. Much of Proverbs 3 works even on a purely human level. You find obedient children from a non-Christian but moral home, and they will reap these blessings and benefits. You find a worker who is faithful and steadfast, and they will have great favor with people, whether they fear the Lord or not.

But here in verses 5 and 6, we see something that transcends the mere human level. This is not merely about human living. This is specifically about trusting and walking with the Lord. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and wisdom will walk in dependence upon the LORD. Trusting God in whatever he says. Trusting his word. Trusting that it is best to listen to the counsel of your parents, because it will lead to a long life. Trusting that it is best to live a life of faithfulness, because it will lead to favor "in the sight of God and man" (verse 4).

Of all the verses in our text this morning, this is where the gospel shines the brightest, because this is fundamentally how we are made right with the LORD: by trusting him and his ways. There is a wonderful story about John Paton, a Scottish missionary who went to the New Hebrides islands in the southwest Pacific. These were tribal people who had never heard of Jesus and were cannibals. Missionaries before him had been killed. But Paton went and preached, and they did not kill him. As he got to know the people and learned their language, he wrestled with how to translate the word "faith." One day a servant came into his house and, as Paton watched, leaned against the doorpost. Paton asked, "What are you doing?" The servant said, "I am leaning."^[2] That was it. That was the word. Leaning on Jesus. Resting your full weight upon him. That is what it means to believe in Jesus. And how fitting that we sang today, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms."^[3] We are leaning on Jesus, and not on our own understanding.

The message of the Bible is that the one who believes in Jesus will be forgiven his sins, will be given eternal life, and will know the joys of walking with God in this life and in the next. So many will try to have it another way, by trusting in their own works or merits or wisdom. But that is not the way. The way to be right with God and walk with God is to trust his ways and not our own.

Quite frankly, we are poor judges of our own ways. "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes" (Proverbs 21:2). We all think that we are on the right path, doing the right thing, believing the truth. That is why it is so important to trust in what the LORD says and not ourselves. We are poor guides of ourselves. So do not lean on your own understanding, but trust in the LORD and acknowledge him!

The blessing is wonderful: "he will make straight your paths." That is, the LORD will guide you in the right way. Last week, I mentioned in the Weekly Word a new production of *Pilgrim's Progress* put out by Revelation Media. It is a great picture of verse 6. The way that Christian was told to walk was the straight path, and that path was the way of blessing. On all sides he faced temptation to stray: there was the path that went off to the town of Morality; the steep hill of the commandments was impossible to negotiate; there was the path through the pasture that looked easier but led to Doubting Castle. But all along the way, the LORD instructed him to stay on the path to the Celestial City. *Pilgrim's Progress* is a great picture of verse 6: "he will make straight your paths."

4. Be Humble for Health (verses 7-8)

Proverbs 3:7-8

Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.

Verse 7 is a restatement of verses 5 and 6: trust in the LORD's ways and not your own. That is the essence of humility. It is deferring not to my own wisdom but to the wisdom of others, and in this case, the LORD. It is a bad thing to be wise in your own eyes. "Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 26:12). To be wise in your own eyes is worse than being a fool. If you know anything about Proverbs, the foolish man is the worst of men.

Instead, we are to fear the LORD. Again in verse 7 the fear of the LORD crops up. This is the key to all of Proverbs. Wisdom is not merely living this life; it is living this life in light of the divine life. Fearing the LORD means walking the righteous path. "The fear of the LORD is the hatred of evil" (Proverbs 8:13). The LORD's ways are the good ways, not the evil ways. Our heart, being evil, will incline toward the evil ways. But that is where we need to trust in the LORD and not in ourselves.

The interesting thing about this exhortation is verse 8. If you walk the right path, you will experience health: "It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones." I do not fully understand the connection between verse 7 and verse 8, and yet there is a connection. In some regards, this is where we need to trust in the LORD, trusting that when you are walking with him, health benefits will come. My best guess at the connection follows:

There are sinful habits and sinful activities that bring bad consequences to your health. We talked about this at the end of chapter 1. Drink too much alcohol, get cirrhosis of the liver, and you die young. You have destroyed yourself. But stay away from that, and you stay away from cirrhosis of the liver. The health benefits come when you walk in the right ways of the Lord. All the ways of the Lord tend toward health. But beyond that, when you are walking in the ways of the LORD, there is a contentment and satisfaction that comes in your heart. You are free from anxiety and worry. You are free from depression. You are secure in your heart. There is a connection between the mind and the body,

and when the mind is at peace, the body is well.

5. Give for Growth (verses 9-10)

Proverbs 3:9-10

Honor the LORD with your wealth
and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.

This is a health, wealth, and prosperity preacher's verse. The claim goes: "You honor the LORD. You give to the LORD. And he will return it to you with more than you gave! So give to the church! And God will give it back to you with even more! You will have plenty! You will be bursting with wealth! So give!"

Now, there is much wrong with that sort of mentality. It is driven mostly by the greed of the preacher. It provides a false motive for giving, as if I am not actually giving at all but rather investing in my own return. That turns it all toward me. But this verse is not focused upon me. It is focused upon the LORD and the needs of others. You give to others because you want to be a blessing to them, not to yourself.

Having said that, I do not want to throw out the baby with the bathwater. I do not want to deny the wonderful truth of this passage: that as we are generous with our wealth, God will provide for us in abundance.

Proverbs 11:24-25

One gives freely, yet grows all the richer;
another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.
Whoever brings blessing will be enriched,
and one who waters will himself be watered.

Do you know people like this? People who give and give, and it only seems like they have more to give? There are people like this. R. G. LeTourneau is the first person who comes to my mind. He was in the business of earth-moving, inventing and creating machines that moved the earth. As his business began to grow, he decided to cap his salary. Anything he earned beyond his salary, he was determined to give away to the Lord's work. The Lord began to bless his work. During World War II, he was producing 70% of all the army's earth-moving machinery. He eventually reached a point where he was giving 90% of his income to Christian causes. At one point, LeTourneau said that the money came in faster than he could give it away. He was convinced that he could not out-give God. He said, "I just keep shoveling out and God just keeps shoveling back, but God's got a bigger shovel."^[4] Through his generosity, many Christians were trained for the mission field and many went to spread the fame of God's name to distant lands.

At this point, a testimony was shared about the blessings that come from giving and trusting the Lord. Bikash, a young Nepali man now serving as a full-time missionary with YWAM, shared these words:

I grew up in a poor family. When I was a child, I used to see my father fighting with my mom every time, beating her and taking her money to buy alcohol. It was really very hard for my mom. When I was five, my mom gave birth to my sister, and when my sister was just six months old, my father ran away with all our money, jewelry, and property. We did not even have money to feed my sister. My mom went to the neighbors asking to borrow money, but no one gave us anything. So my mom started working. She used to carry my sister in front and bricks on her back. When I was ten, I started doing simple jobs: selling newspapers in the morning and ice cream in the afternoon, and helping my mom in the evening. But as we were growing, my mom could not take care of both of us. Then my pastor talked to me about a children's home. My mom cried, but there was no other option. She wanted us to have a good education and a future. So I came to the children's home when I was twelve. It was awesome. I had everything I needed, and most importantly I came to know more about Jesus. I was baptized when I was fourteen.

After I graduated, I moved to Kathmandu and studied computer science. But then I decided to go abroad to provide for my family, since we had no house or property. I did everything I could to arrange it. When I finally found someone who could help send me abroad, and I was ready with all my papers, that man had an accident and had to rest for a month. At the same time, a friend from church told me he had a job for me: to lead a missionary team to the mountains. I said yes, since I had a month to spare and would also earn some money. When I returned from the trek, the man again asked if I still wanted to go abroad. I said no, because God had put DTS (Discipleship Training School) in my heart. The missionary team were from Kona and were with YWAM. They told me everything about DTS, and I felt like God wanted me to do it. But I did not have the money, and if I did DTS I could not work or pay rent or for my studies. The team said, "You just focus on God and DTS. We will take care of everything." And they paid all my fees and began supporting me every month. God closed all the other doors and brought me to DTS.

It has been more than a year now that I have been with YWAM. I am a full-time missionary, and I am still studying. I have been distributing Bibles, showing people the Jesus film, praying for people, and leading foreign missionaries to the mountains and serving as their translator. God has done so many things in my life. I was scared that I would not be able to take care of my family, and now he has blessed my family so much that everyone is happy. He has blessed me beyond what I could have imagined.

I want to say something personal here. As a church, Rock Valley Bible Church has sought to model this. Our heart's desire has been to give away half of what comes in to missions and ministry beyond us. We reached 25% at one point. We did not make budget, and so we had to pull back. But the aspiration remains: to be a giving church, and to trust that God provides. We are not telling you to give to Rock Valley Bible

Church and God will give it back to you. Just give. Give to what the Lord puts on your heart. Give to the Pregnancy Care Center. Give to support a missionary. Support an orphan in Nepal or India. Just be a giver, and trust that God is going to return upon you the blessing of it.

Give. Trust the Lord.

As for Bikash, our family has been supporting him for about fifteen years, perhaps \$50 a month when we started and \$80 now. Just giving into his life, month after month. Who is more blessed? Is he more blessed, or are we? It is more blessed to give than to receive. From an earthly perspective, our giving to him has been a one-way street. But from a spiritual perspective, there is a joy in our hearts that this boy who was beaten as a child, who was going to be out on the streets, got an education, came to know Christ, and is now laboring for him full-time in the mountains of Nepal. Where else would you want to invest? Not all orphans turn out like this. But the opportunity is there. Honor the LORD with your wealth by helping the helpless, and trust that as you give, you will never lack.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 1, 2019 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, rev. ed. (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 135.

[2] This illustration is widely circulated online. I could not trace back the original source for the quote. The oldest reference I could find is from 1911: A. J. P., "What Is Faith?" in *Gospel Tidings Annual: A True Report for Old and Young* (1911). You can read it here: <https://bibletruthpublishers.com/what-is-faith/gospel-tidings-annual-1911-a-true-report-for-old-and-young/la150635>.

[3] Elisha A. Hoffman and Anthony J. Showalter, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," 1887.

[4] R. G. LeTourneau, quoted in Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 214.