

Prayer

When I call on You, Lord God, hear what I say and deal carefully with me, for I am bruised. I offer no excuse for the wrong I have done, for I know my humanity and the tempter's voice; but I am not ashamed to come to You and seek Your help. Be my friend now when I need You most, and by Your Spirit, bring me through my time of trial and lead me safely on; give me the courage to pursue Your will, O Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Food

Pray that governments will regulate and companies will manage food production in a way that reflects godliness, care, and a respect for the future of life and real human need

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the example set to the young by sports personalities*
- *Pray for people whose governments do not represent them*
- *Give thanks to God for your security and peace*

Meditation

Great and Mighty Lord, You are more than I can ever be:

- You are like a library compared to my book;
- You are like great wisdom compared to my knowledge;
- You are like a forest compared to my sapling;
- You are like everything compared to my possessions;
- You are like a roaring wind compared to my breath;
- You are like all history compared to my brief life;
- You are like a computer network compared to my peripheral;
- You are like an encyclopaedia compared to the article I write;
- You are like a landscape compared to my snapshot;
- You are like perfection compared to my sinfulness;

Make me whole, Gracious Lord, in Your good time, I pray.

Bible Study - Proverbs 3:9-18

⁹ Honour the LORD with everything you possess and with the first fruits of everything you do; ¹⁰ then your storerooms will be filled to overflowing, and your wine-cellar will be brim-full of wine. ¹¹ Do not scorn the discipline of the LORD, my child, or let yourself become tired of His correction, ¹² for the LORD constructively criticises the one He loves, just as a father does in order to encourage a son. ¹³ Happy are those who find wisdom, and who advocate understanding, ¹⁴ for it is better to obtain wisdom than money, and more beneficial than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than fine jewellery, and there is nothing you desire that can compare with her. ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand, and riches and honour in her left hand. ¹⁷ Her ways are pleasantly delightful, and her paths all lead to peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; and those who hold her firmly are truly happy.

Review

This is one of the best loved passages of the book of Proverbs, and it contains many memorable sayings with advice about godly living. The words feel timeless and mostly fit well with the Gospel, because it does not pretend to describe the truths of salvation, but rather, offers a pattern of living that is pleasing to God. The teaching is best read as a personal appeal, calling on us to place the Lord at the centre of our lives, to accept His blessing and His rebuke, and to make it our life's work to pursue what is right. All this fits the Gospel closely; but where we may have difficulties with this passage is the part where the rewards of such a life are described as fulfilling for their own sake (3:16-18), because the idea of earthly reward for doing what is right does not appear to fit with the teaching of the New Testament. As Christians, we can only make full sense of this if we see Christ Himself as the only true and complete 'wisdom' of God.

We begin with the obligation to offer all we have to the Lord (3:9). The Hebrew people had several ways of symbolising this, the principle one being the practice of giving a 'tithe' of all produce to the Lord, and also the offering of the first portion of any produce or work, normally called the 'first fruits'. It is relatively easy for us to develop ways of doing something similar with our money, but if we bear the agricultural origins of this passage in mind, it will help us understand what is said here about possessions and wealth.

There is a strong theme in this passage about life's success coming from obedience to the Lord. This teaching is given in the form of what a father says to a child (3:11), but the principle is clear; if our relationship with the Lord is mature, and we can receive His discipline as help rather than punishment, then we will indeed be blessed. It sounds straightforward, but for all manner of reasons (coming from home life, school or social pressures), many people shun criticism (3:12). Indeed, the word itself is often perceived entirely negatively, when it is vital for our growth that we are able to hear and receive criticism from the Lord and others. It is tragic that some will not hear criticism, and have complex ways of deflecting anything other than what they wish to hear, even from God. Without hearing the Lord's criticism or reproof, and accepting it and acting upon it, we are unlikely to grow as Christians or experience the fulfilment and blessing that our Lord longs to give us. This merits our careful consideration, for it is essential; especially for those who have been saved. We cannot walk a path of holiness and live out our salvation if we do not act upon what the Lord tells us just because we cannot bear to be criticised!

The truth is that the Lord's intimate presence gives us both His healing and His judgement. This is the wisdom that is 'better than ... money, and more beneficial than gold' (3:14); it is not just the benefits of wisdom that appeal to us, such as long life, happiness (3:17) or peace (3:18). God's people of ancient times lived off the land with no real knowledge of when disaster or war might strike, and such things were valued for what they were, God's true blessings. In our world today, we buy everything, including health (in some instances), and money has replaced God as the one thing that people believe they cannot live without! Consequently, the blessings identified in this text do not appear to us to be the consequences of a life of faith, and when suffering comes, we question our faith rather than the real culprit which is the natural sinful world in which we live.

Thank God therefore, that through the Gospel we know that whatever our circumstances, God's blessings do indeed come to us through the presence of Christ and the wisdom He imparts. This beautiful passage of Scripture we have read today urges us to do two things; to take full advantage of the Lord's presence to listen and accept His guidance, and to return to Him in worship some portion of the blessings we have received from Him. To do this will give our lives genuine spiritual balance.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which verse appears to you to sum up what is said in passage? Share your differing responses.
2. How important is it to give things back to the Lord? How and when should we do this? What do you think it means?
3. Discuss the importance of wisdom in our 'commercial' and money driven world today.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This Scripture is challenging. Many good Christian folk who have followed the Lord for years may never have come across this passage, or perhaps heard it only as a reading in church amongst others, but never preached upon. Yet here is a word from the Lord that asks us to give our uninhibited attention to one of life's essentials, the wisdom of God! Really, we need to see within these words the presence of Jesus Christ as the true wisdom, and then the whole passage makes sense. The question remains however, how do we 'pursue' the true value of this wisdom?

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Read carefully through this passage and ask yourself whether you are willing to accept the Lord's 'honest criticism' of your life and what you do. Also, are you willing to receive this only from some people and not from others? It is important that we do not place limitations on how God can communicate with us!*
- *Pray for a more open and honest acceptance amongst God's people that we need to be free to offer each other genuine criticism in the Lord's love, without it being constantly interpreted as negativity and making people feel rejected!*

Final Prayer

Give me, Lord a heart that is open to Your guidance and Your will. May I be prepared to go wherever you may call, with the courage to stand against any evil, using the gifts You have given me. Help me to serve others under all circumstances, so that God may be glorified in all I do. Thanks be to God. AMEN