

Wisdom and Fear

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

I'd like to start today as I often do with a question for you to ponder. And this week's question is this: Imagine that God appeared to you in a dream and God said to you, "Ask me for anything you want and I'll give it to you." What would you ask for? Think about that for a minute. You can only ask for one thing (and no asking for more wishes — that's the genie rule). So what would you ask God for if God said you could have anything?

Some of you had an instant answer, some of you're still thinking about it. I wonder how many in the room would have asked for something related to either finances or relationships, romance, or influence and power, in the workplace or in the broader world. [By a] show of hands, if you would have asked for one of those things (you don't have to tell me which one). Only one or two hands. I thought it was going to be almost everybody. You might have asked God for something related to health, either for you or for family member. Some people are nodding their heads yes to health. What did I miss? If you want to shout it out, what's the thing that I missed?

Female voice in crowd: World peace.

Pastor Scott: World peace [laughter in crowd]. It seems obvious in retrospect, yeah.

Male voice in crowd: The Elder Wand

Pastor Scott: The Elder Wand. Harry Potter nerd (laughs). Well there's a story in the Bible about King Solomon, who was the third king of Israel. There was King Saul and then King David, and David's son Solomon was the third king. And the story is told in one of our lectionary readings for today. We've been using the lectionary for quite some time now. It's working really well for us, it gives you a chance to look at the Scriptures ahead of time if you want to, which I always encourage. I'm not going to read this particular text but rather summarize it and get us to some of the other texts from the lectionary today. But here's what happens. When King David dies,

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his son Solomon ascends to the throne and Solomon loves God. And God does exactly what I just described to you; he appears to Solomon in a dream and says, "Name it. What one thing would you like? Tell me what you'd like me to give you," and Solomon says this: "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil. And the Bible says, and this is first Kings chapter three now:

"It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this, and the Lord says, 'Because you've asked for this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or for the life of your enemies, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind. No one like you has been before you, and no one like you shall arise after you.'" And then God says, "I give you also what you have not asked — both riches and honor — all your life. No other kings shall compare with you."

So if you've ever heard the expression that a person "has all the wisdom of Solomon," that's where this is where that comes from. And if you've heard the expression that a person has "more money than Solomon," that's where this comes from, too. I think the lesson we can all agree on is this. If God ever comes to you in a dream and says, "What can I give you?" Think about what you really want, and then ask for wisdom (laughs). Just kidding, I think that only works if you really actually sincerely want wisdom. But wisdom is the first word in today's sermon [entitled] "Wisdom and Fear." Wisdom is the first one of those things. Wisdom, discernment, understanding. Knowing the difference, it seems specifically to mean knowing the difference between good and evil.

By the way, do you remember the story of the Garden of Eden? Adam and Eve had this beautiful place where they walked with God in the cool of the evenings and there was one rule. They can eat anything they want, but they can't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That's interesting, isn't it? And I want you to think of that like we're going down a highway and there's an exit sign that seems really interesting, and we're not going to get off that exit. You can think about that on your own, do your own study on that. Because Solomon asks for wisdom and specifically says give me the understanding to know what is good and what is evil, what's right and what's wrong. And wisdom is rather an important concept in the scriptures. It's so important that we actually have a whole section of the Bible that we call Wisdom Literature. You know how I talk about how the Bible is not a book but it's a library? The Wisdom Literature is like one shelf in the library and they're all Old Testament books from the Hebrew Bible, so Jewish people actually just call this the Writings (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, also known as Song of Songs). And it's a category of writing that is not only wise — it's not only giving you wisdom the way you would think since it's titled "Wisdom Literature," but it's also poetic. It's theatrical. It's hyperbolic. So when we read this

kind of literature in the Bible, I feel like we might need a big caution sign (for some of us more than others perhaps): “Caution! Figurative Language Ahead.” We want to take everything literally sometimes, but there's this whole section of the Bible that's just full of poetry. And by the way, almost all the other sections of the Bible are informed by this section. I've said this before and I mean it in the nicest way possible, but if you don't know how to read poetry yet, you don't know how to read the Bible yet. So go take a literature course at MCC or something. Learn how to read poetry and your understanding of the Bible, I promise you, will open up in a way that you won't believe.

So, we're going to look at two types of Wisdom Literature from the lectionary today, the book of Proverbs and the book of Psalms. And I want you to keep in mind this concept that there might be some figurative language. So (RIP, Aretha) the song “Chain of Fools” is not about a literal chain. That kind of thing is helpful to know when you read, especially the Psalms, which are songs. Okay, I had to do an RIP Aretha in there. It's like, how can I force this into the sermon and I just did it, so it works [laughter]. All right, let's start with this. I want to give you a little mini lesson on how to read the book of Proverbs. I'm going to give you something that one of my favorite college professors gave me and it's called “the curve of ordinary human experience.” This is a way to understand the book of Proverbs. Okay, so are you familiar with a bell curve? Some of us hated the bell curve in school because we were like, “I'm good enough to get good grades. That should be an A. But if someone else is smarter than me, then I can't get an A.” So let's put the curve up there.

A bell curve looks like this [refers to PowerPoint slide]. The way this curve works is on the Y axis (I know I'm out of my depth, math people) is the likelihood of something that occurs. And on the X axis we have a few options here. On the little skinny part of the curve over here, we have something that's unusually bad that could happen. And on that skinny part of the curve over here, we have something that's unusually good that could happen. And the middle part, the big fat part of the curve, is normal/ordinary. This is the ordinary human experience, right? The way my professor described it is this. He told a story of how one of his sons was four years old and had climbed up a tree. And he said to him, “Kyle, get down out of the tree, you're going to fall and break your leg!” which would have been a fat part of the curve type of experience for a four-year-old falling out of a tree; breaking your leg. It's not a good experience, but on the skinny parts of the curve — the ones that are less likely to occur but are still possible — could be something much worse than a broken leg. We don't need to go there. Or it could have been, like, not a scratch. The kid fell twelve feet out of a tree and didn't get hurt at all. But his instruction to his son was, get out of that tree, you're going to break your leg. That's the fat part of the curve, and that is what the Book of Proverbs wants to tell us. Act in the way that you should act, the way I'm about to tell you to act, because otherwise bad things will happen to

you. But if you do act the way you're supposed to act, good things will happen to you. Why do bad things happen to good people? Because they're in the skinny part of the curve sometimes. Why do good things happen to bad people? Because they're in the other skinny part of the curve.

The book of Proverbs is not a book of promises. When it says, "Train up your children in the way they should go, and when they're old they will not depart from it," that's not a promise. Guess what? Sometimes you do everything right and your children still depart from the ways you taught them. That's not God breaking a promise because it wasn't a promise, it was a proverb. This is concerned with the fat part of the curve of ordinary human experience. Does that make sense? I hope that's helpful to you when you read the Proverbs, because sometimes you read Proverbs and you think, "What am I doing wrong? What is broken in me that this didn't happen the way it was supposed to happen, the way the Bible promised it to happen?" Well it's a proverb, not a promise. This happens in our own proverbs, by the way. They can contradict each other. There are proverbs in the Bible, literally one verse next to another, verses that say the exact opposite thing. It's not subtle at all. It says, "Answer a fool according to his folly," and the next one says, "Do not answer the fool according to his folly." That's the way it is. We have, "Too many cooks spoil the broth," if you've ever heard that one, but we also have, "Many hands make light work." Which one is true? Well, they both are. They're proverbs. Am I making enough sense now? OK let's move on.

With that in mind, let's look at the reading from the Proverbs today, which is Proverbs nine one through six. And if you want to follow along in the red Bibles this is page five sixteen. Or you can just listen if you'd like. And in this passage wisdom is personified. Okay, literature here! Wisdom is personified, which means it is given a human character. And wisdom is profound, personified as a beautiful woman because, apparently, the only thing to get the attention of foolish men is beautiful women [laughter]. And it says this: "Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn her seven pillars, she has slaughtered animals, she has mixed her wine. She has also set her table. She has sent out her servant girls. She calls from the highest places in the town, 'You that are simple, turn in here.'" It doesn't mean, like, people who only have their backpack and they don't have a lot of possessions. It means, "Dummies, this way." "To those without sense, she says, 'Come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.'" By the way, does that sound familiar to us as Christians? "'Lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of insight.'" This is the picture of wisdom the Scriptures give us in the book of Proverbs.

So I mentioned we have another piece of wisdom literature to look at. The lectionary also assigns us a couple of Psalms. We're going to look at Psalm thirty four, so flip back a few pages to page four forty one in these read Bibles. Psalm thirty four verses nine through fourteen

starts right in the middle of the Psalm. It's like you turn on the radio and the song was already playing. The lectionary does that sometimes. "Oh fear the Lord, you His holy ones. For those who fear him have no want." Let's stop for a minute. This is the second word from today's sermon title, if you remember, "Wisdom and Fear." This is a challenging word, isn't it? We find it a lot in the Bible like you find wisdom a lot. You find fear a lot, and fear...God...that doesn't seem like the way I want to think about God. Anybody else feel challenged by this instruction to fear God? Are we supposed to be afraid of God, is that what it means? The Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards had this the sermon which is very often used even in secular high schools as a way to demonstrate figurative language. You read this in literature class, so maybe don't take that literature class. But the sermon describes people as being like a spider dangling on a thread that God is holding over a fire. And this sermon is ostensibly evangelistic, which means ostensibly contains good news. And so much of good news preaching starts with something like a spider hanging over fire, which doesn't make a ton of sense. But if that's the picture of God that we have then it sort of makes sense to be afraid of God.

I believe Jesus gives us a different and more beautiful picture of God, which you hear me talk about that a lot. But the psalmist goes on to describe what it means to fear the Lord, so maybe we'll get a little bit more definition from this. Let's go back and start again [in] Psalm thirty four nine. "O fear the Lord, you His holy ones. For those who fear him have no want. The young lions suffer wanton hunger but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Come o children, listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Which of you desires life and covets many days to enjoy good? Then keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." So this actually sounds a lot to me like fearing the Lord means doing what you know is right because it yields the result that you want from your life. Which should sound very familiar to us because that's basically what the Proverbs tell us, too — wisdom literature. It's essentially the wisdom that Solomon was given to know the difference between what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. Solomon wanted to have that wisdom so that he could lead God's people. By the way, later on in Proverbs nine (the chapter we just looked at a minute ago) and then also, word-for-word in one of the other Psalms that the lectionary gives us today, the one that I didn't read, you get the following statement. This appears in scripture a number of times: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." I always read that to say when you fear the Lord you will begin to have wisdom. That's a valid reading, I'm not saying chuck that out, but what if it could mean the fear of the Lord is defined as the beginning of wisdom. That seems to be what it says in Psalm thirty four. Fearing the Lord means beginning to have an understanding of what's right and wrong and doing what's right. So there's this clear connection between what the Bible calls fear of

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God and what the Bible calls wisdom. They are very closely connected and sometimes it seems like they are used almost interchangeably.

So it's important for us to read these texts from the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament even though they can be confusing and imprecise. How many of you love when the words of scripture are imprecise? How does that make you feel, good and secure like you should know exactly what you're going to do now? We would like it to be a lot more precise than it is, wouldn't we? But it's important to read them even when they are sometimes imprecise. But as always, we as Christian people read the whole Bible through the lens of Christ's teaching, Christ's life, Christ's death and resurrection. And then secondarily through the lens of how the apostles handed the faith down to us. Jesus is the fullest most complete and only perfect revelation of God's character and nature. So let's take a look at what the New Testament has to say about wisdom. Today's epistle reading that the lectionary gives us is from the book of Ephesians, and boy were they on theme today! Sometimes you read the lectionary passages and you're like, how do they put these together? Did they just pull them out of a hat? But sometimes you read the lectionary passages like, wow, this is a day about wisdom, and this is one of those days. Ephesians chapter five fifteen through twenty. Once again, the page number here in the red Bible is nine five two. If you don't own a Bible please take one of these home with you, put your name in it, and bring it back with you and take it home with you and it will be your Bible. We would love to have you reading the Scriptures on your own time and studying them. And if you're a person who likes to learn how to read the Bible would like to learn that better, please talk to me because we have opportunities coming up this year that I think will be exciting for you. All right. Now. This passage that we're about to read from the Book of Ephesians, which is a letter written to some Christians in the early church. It's near the end of a long section in which the Apostle Paul is writing mostly to what seem to be new Christian converts from the Gentile world, and he's telling them how they ought to act now that their lives and their souls have been redeemed. He tells them to forget about the old ways and to put on, as if putting on clothing, the way of Jesus. And then he warns them, and I think by extension warns all of us, that that old way of life is the way of death that, among other things, it breaks community with each other when we act in the ways we used to act. And that the old behaviors will cost them and would cost us our spiritual inheritance; the one that we've just been written into at the time of our conversion. And it's not Wisdom Literature, it's not on that shelf in the library, but it reads very much like the curve of ordinary human experience that I had on the screen a minute ago. In fact, I want you to listen for how it concludes. This is Ephesians five fifteen through twenty.

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time because the days are evil. So do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do

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not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery, but be filled with the spirit as you sing psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts. Giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” So this is how that big long section in Ephesians ends. It says be wise. Know the difference between good and evil, between right and wrong. And not only know the difference, because often isn't this true that it's not that we don't know, it's that we don't do?

I think what what this description that Paul gives us, which is somewhat consistent with the Proverbs, is what you should really fear is what your sin is doing to you and to the people around you. Not so much fearing God because you're dangling over a lake of fire. But fearing the way you are destroying your own well-being and that of others. And you should fear the fact that when you continue and when you persist in that type of life, it breaks fellowship with other people. And carried out to its full conclusion, that actually breaks fellowship with God as well. Not because God wants nothing to do with you anymore but because after a certain number of wrong choices, you want nothing to do with God.

So we're just a few minutes away from coming to the communion table and to prayer. By the way, remember there's always a member of our prayer team at the back of the room ready to pray with you and for you during communion. But as we get ready for communion I want to hint at the gospel reading from the lectionary passages today, and again I'm not going to read that whole text that's from John chapter six. We studied some of the stuff that led up to it a week or two ago. This is after the feeding of the five thousand, the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, and and the people just don't seem to get it. They're chasing Jesus around but for the wrong reasons, and Jesus tells them, your heart's not in the right place. And they just don't get it, and they don't get it, and they don't get it, and finally he says something really alarming. He says, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Huh? And guess what. He lost thousands of followers, literally thousands of them, who just kind of remembered they had somewhere else to be. Because this just got a little bit too weird. The point was, I think, that they should stop looking for the same old religious practice that they'd always known and stop trusting in their lineage to keep them in God's good graces. But instead, they should place every trust in him. And I want to suggest to you and to myself that we should listen for a similar message today. All this talk about wisdom and fear and knowing right and wrong is good and fruitful. It's encouraging and it's convicting and we need it all in our lives, but the ultimate act of wisdom, the ultimate act of reverence for God's power and majesty is to follow Jesus utterly and completely. And not just to follow him around like the crowd was doing because they wanted more miracles and more bread, but to completely consume him and be consumed by him so that nothing is safe anymore. And that everything is now open to redemption which means it's open to change, and

we don't want that in our lives. It's open to transformation which means what we are comfortable with is going to be wrenched around and turned and become something different. It's even open to complete demolition and reconstruction, and we don't want that. And in that sense, it can be legitimately terrifying. Now we can talk about fear of the Lord and know what we mean. If you've ever read the first book of The Chronicles of Narnia, "The Lion the Witch and The Wardrobe," (and by the way that is the first book. It's not "The Magician's Nephew!" [laughter] This is the thing people are going to tweet from the sermon). But if you've ever read "The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe" there's that amazing conversation between Susan and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan the Lion, the great Christ figure in the story. And they're trying to explain to Susan who he is. "Aslan is a lion, the lion. The great lion!" and Susan said, "Oh, I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe?" Which is a very British thing to say. Do you remember what Mr. Beaver says? "Safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you." I love that line so much. It is not safe to follow Jesus. Jesus is not safe, he will demo and reconstruct your whole life. But he's good. He's the king.

So if you've been sensing the call of God on your life, maybe for a period of weeks, maybe just this morning. But if you've been afraid of what you'll lose, afraid of what will happen to you if you try and then fail...How many of you don't start something in case you might fail at it? If you've been afraid that maybe there isn't enough forgiveness to cover your particular sin or there isn't enough grace to go around, I want you to remember that Jesus spoke of those alarming words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood right after he had produced this miracle of multiplication of food. As if to say, if you are willing to come to this table, there is plenty for everybody. And then, this is the thing I want you to leave with today, if you have nothing else I want you to remember and hear again and again the words that Jesus spoke to practically everyone he met after the resurrection. What did he say to them? "Do not fear." Don't be afraid. There's always enough food at the table of the Lord for everybody who wants to eat it, and you don't have to live in fear anymore. The table is open and I invite you to come. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com