

Proverbs 3:1-12

A healthy heartbeat

I take it that we're all getting quite familiar with the

digital version of meeting

nowadays, four months since we started using Zoom like this. Some of us have probably started to move away from the hard-copy

Bible

to the

Electronic equivalent

And there are arguments either way for this. Much of the time I'm studying the Bible at home, it will be with the electronic version - here's a

Screenshot

But I remember a few interesting little questions about Bibles, some from way back. There was that time, so the story goes, that Ken Mullis - formerly an elder here, quite briefly, in case you didn't know - but way back when he was pastor at Redruth Baptist Church back in the early 1970's - who was trying to make the case that the Bible is a special book but didn't require a special "holy" status. So he put a Bible on the floor and

Stood on it

I asked Jenny if she was there to see it, and she can't actually remember it. But she did remember him when he was a teacher at Camborne Grammar School

Throwing Bibles across the room

Another story I think I heard way back from Peter Hollywood, another former member here, back in the days of

Coffee bar evangelism

You have to remember that that was the 1970's, and there was this fad for coloured lighting. So one evening Peter - or whoever it was - was trying to share the Gospel with someone in a probably not particularly well lit corner of the coffee bar, opened his ... oh dear ...

Red-letter Bible

To something that Jesus had said, only to find that in the pink light, red type was invisible on white paper, so the words of Jesus seemed to have become invisible!

I don't know what you feel about the practice of

Marking Bibles

Personally, I don't, nowadays, and haven't for years. I found that when I used a Bible

that I had underlined bits of, or had written notes in, I was more drawn to my notes than to the words of the Bible itself. And there was always the possibility that I just couldn't understand what I had written, or why I had particularly underlined it, all those years ago. The markings, *for me*, become a distraction.

But perhaps one of the simultaneously best *and worst* things you can do to a bit of the Bible is to convert it into a song. It can be a very good thing to do - in fact, you could almost argue that Scripture says we should:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

(Colossians 3:16)

But what happens if you have to hack the verses around a bit to make it fit the song? Yes, having the

Tune and rhyme and rhythm

Can help you to memorise it ... but how much mangling is worth how much memorising? What if the way it is converted into a song misleads you into viewing a bit of the Bible less helpfully? Take this verse from Psalm 46, for example:

"Be still, and know that I am God."

(Psalms 46:10)

I know a couple of ways that has been set to music, and both of them make it sound as if this is about a Christian becoming inwardly quiet in order to worship God. Look at it in its context, and that verse doesn't say that, though. (Some homework for you!)

And even if it's not wrenched out of context, it's possible that the Bible verse is somehow tamed by the music, and we can almost become *too* familiar with it - and presume we understand and obey it, just because it's part of a song we really like.

I'm just wanting to start by asking that question about the song we sang earlier, and the Bible passage we read together. One verse of each is very close to the other, as you might have noticed. Here's the Bible version:

***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.***

(Proverbs 3:5-6)

And here's the song version (**same slide**)

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart
He will direct your paths
In all your ways acknowledge him*

What do you think? One of the four lines is missed out. And two of the lines are swapped around, so it's possible the logical order of what the Bible says is missed. But song version, with the tune and all that, is probably much easier to memorise. Have we won, or have we lost, with that trade-off?

Particularly with this verse set to music that we know, this is one of the most familiar passages in this whole book of Proverbs. We remember a few of the one-liners from later on, but, *passage-wise*, this is possibly the most familiar section. All too easy to just read it once more, and say Yes. Well, that's better than saying No, I guess. But as I've sat with these verse in front of me this week this week, it has been a bit like

sitting quietly in a field

And after a while you start to notice little movements in the grass,

Ants, beetles

And so on start to emerge, and then you realise the whole place around you is alive. It's a bit like that with this passage - though for me it's been more a matter of questions that have emerged from the undergrowth. I don't think I have all the answers to these questions yet, but I thought that this morning I'd share some of each. And perhaps we can re-visit them this evening, and think them through a bit more thoroughly together.

I've summarised this all with the

Title: a healthy heartbeat

Because throughout the passage, it seems to me that it is not just about doing certain things, living certain ways - though those are also involved - but all of this have to stem from what we call "the heart". That is a repeated theme throughout the whole book

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

(Proverbs 4:23)

My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.

(Proverbs 23:26)

So it shouldn't be a surprise to find it here too, in these early chapters.

So, right in this first verse ...

- **Remember the "two ways to live"? (1)**

This rhythm keeps beating just beneath the surface of the whole book. Remember

Torvill and Dean - and Bolero

If you know that piece of music, can you recall that there's a snare drum tapping away the exact same rhythm all the way through the 15 minutes of the piece. And "the way of wisdom, contrasted with the way of folly" taps away at us throughout this book, almost every verse.

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments,

(Proverbs 3:1)

See the contrast. Forgetting, or keeping? What's it going to be? What is wisdom, and what is folly? even if kicking over the traces can sometimes seem like a lot more fun!

And then we run immediately into another big question about how to handle this book, in just the next verse. It sounds all very nicely set up as

- a promise to claim? (2)

... but is it?

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.

(Proverbs 3:1-2)

Is it really the case that if you do what Mum and Dad tell you, then you are guaranteed a long life, that “length of days”? Is that what it’s actually saying? A cast-iron guarantee? I think we need to consider this more in terms of what you might hear in sporting terms as

A percentage play

So it’s competition darts, and you and your opponent could both check out in one visit. You’ve both got tricky combinations of shots to make, but it’s your throw first. Do you play safe, to make sure you’ve got an easy check-out next time ... and risk your opponent making the long shot ... or do *you* go for the difficult check-out right away?

That’s your “percentage play”. You consider how good you and your opponent are, and how difficult the shots are, and you work it out. Which does not guarantee that you win, but which way gives you *the better chance* of winning? And it’s the same with so many of these principles from Proverbs: *principles* - percentages, almost - rather than practices. So what will give you the *better* chance of a long life and relative peace? Or you could flip that around and say “peace with the relatives”!

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.

(Proverbs 3:1-2)

Value that parental input. *Follow* that wisdom that they will hopefully give you. They have seen more of life than you have, and possibly learned the hard way for themselves. What value is it to make the same mistakes yourself? You can call yourself “authentic”, if you really want. So then you’re just an authentic *idiot*, big deal!

- Whose “steadfast love”? (3)

There are two ways to take this verse, it occurred to me.

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 favour and good success in the sight of God and man.

(Proverbs 3:3-4)

We’ve got two of the big OT words in verse 3. It’s not just wisdom-for-life stuff, but the character of God stuff. “Steadfast love” - a single Hebrew word, and not really easy to translate in even two in English - is something intrinsic to the nature of God himself. As is “faithfulness” - sometimes translated “truth” - truth *to yourself and to those around you*. Here are God’s words, God’s self-description:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ...”

(Exodus 34:6)

Same two words as in Proverbs 3. So when we read

Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;

(Proverbs 3:3)

Is that simply saying that you need to recognise that you need God in your life? That you need his grace, you need him to forgive your sins, you need his wisdom to guide you ... and he has promised all of these things in Jesus Christ, so you just need to ask ... and receive? You do not let things characteristics of God's nature pass you by. You make sure you are in the appropriate place to receive them - just you make sure you are in an appropriate place to get a suntan by going outdoors. The sort of

Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

(Jude 1:21)

Put yourself in the appointed place of God's promise blessing. Get out of the shade. Bask in the sun. (That was an unplanned pun!) And yet I think Proverbs is saying even more than that.

Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;

(Proverbs 3:3)

Couldn't that also be saying that we should increasingly be people of steadfast love and faithfulness ourselves? We should start to show those characteristics too. It is something of the family likeness coming through, if we are truly in the family of God?

But whichever of these possibilities - or whether it's both, is it something

- **Inner or outer? (3)**

... bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.

(Proverbs 3:3)

Is this talking about a literal necklace - like the Jews did with boxes with Scripture verses on their wrists and foreheads? Or is this just poetry? Isn't it more likely to be a *whatever works* answer?

Maybe we shouldn't think an adornment like a necklace. Maybe we should think in the boringly practical realm of

Glasses on a chain

You *need* those glasses, when you get to a certain age. When you need them on and times, and off at times - if it's just reading glasses like mine - there's always that danger of putting them down and not remembering just where you left them. So here is the practical solution. It keeps them *always* accessible. Because you might need them at *any* time.

And maybe that suggests us thinking about training ourselves to have good, positive, helpful, godly habits. Or maybe it suggests that we need to get a Bible app on our smartphones, if we have them - then you will always have God's record of covenant-love and faithful truth ready at hand. So long as you can remember your unlocking code!

... write them on the tablet of your heart.

(Proverbs 3:3)

But there is the *heart* mentioned here, too. This isn't just about outward practicalities of habit. This is about having these things deep down within, as part of the foundation of your being *and thinking*. Remember, heart in the Bible isn't just feeling, it's the whole of the real inner you. It's all of those things that make you who you most fundamentally are.

And if those beauties ...

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 favour and good success in the sight of God and man.

(Proverbs 3:3-4)

Are your attitudes and your adornment, it is not even that *God* will be pleased to see the image of his son growing within you, but, most likely, *other people* will find you a good and faithful friend too.

- **heart and head? (5)**

Already mentioned this, so I don't want to labour it again. Just don't set these two against each other in the way you will commonly hear it said. This is not "the thinking you" versus "the feeling you". It's not "left brain / right brain". And it's not "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus". Heart and thinking are very, *very* closely linked, the way the Bible talks about them. So this next verse

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.

(Proverbs 3:5)

Isn't saying "follow your gut instincts as a Christian, because if you just think you will deceive yourself". It's contrasting, if you like, *God's* way of looking at things, and *typical human* ways of looking at them, *and then opting for God's* take rather than our own. Put the trust of your whole being, in every way, on God, and what he has done. Believe in ...

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ ...

(2 Corinthians 13:14)

Because if it's left to "our own [human] understanding", we will just revert back to religion and rituals. We will try to buy God's favour with the right words and the right rituals, instead of relying upon the grace that Jesus Christ has already made fully and freely available, if we will simply put our trust in him.

But, if you *have* put your trust in him ...

- **Who does what? (6)**

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

(Proverbs 3:6)

If we recognise that we need this Jesus to be our Lord, as well as our Saviour - he is to be supreme over *all* our ways, *all* aspects of our living - what happens next? Is this just saying that the rest of life will be easy? None of those nasty

Windy bends

To worry about ahead? I suspect that's not quite what this is saying. That word translated "straight" can also mean "upright". I think this might mean that God will re-write our inner map and compass. He will now set out *good*, upright paths which we are then to walk along. They might be hard roads at times, that will require our effort and commitment to walk along. Perhaps you remember

Pilgrim's Progress / By-Path Meadow

It could be that there is an easy path, and an *upright* one. God has set that upright path in front of you. He has given you his Spirit so that you will recognise, to increasing degrees, which is which. And it is then up to you and me to decide to take that path that he has chosen for us.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

(Ephesians 2:10)

- **Who knows best? (7)**

It will still be a temptation to plead the wisdom of Pilgrim's comfortable field which, it appears, permits us to travel in parallel with the true road. But just don't.

Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

(Proverbs 3:7)

We need to have that profound awe of what God has said, and then just do it. Even if we don't totally understand, at times like that, just (like that old song)

*Trust and obey,
for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus*

That's pretty much what it says here, isn't it?

It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

(Proverbs 3:8)

Again, don't ground that verse too much in the literal instead of the poetry it's written as. And don't push it so far as a promise for a feeling of ease in all that you do. There's the two things still to keep in tension:

"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

(Matthew 11:28-30)

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

(2 Timothy 2:3)

Two separate quite big topics to finish with here this morning, and not really time to go into either of them in much detail at all. But both of them important aspects of being a disciple - or look, still on screen, a *good soldier* of Christ Jesus. And in both cases, it's a question of whether we will apply those things we've just read, about trusting in what God says, if our instincts maybe say otherwise:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own

understanding.

(Proverbs 3:5)

Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

(Proverbs 3:7)

We can devise ways to weasel out of these two areas of discipleship. The call is to trust God, and, in the right sense, fear God, and put some of those convenient alternative arguments behind us.

- **Discipleship: money and possessions (9-10)**

Honour 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.

(Proverbs 3:9-10)

You can see why the so-called "Prosperity Gospel" would love this. For them, the firstfruits is sending your money off to the televangelist, and the rest is simply waiting for God to keep his side of the bargain and send you even more money back. Folks, we're not going there. If you need me to, we can tackle that whole load of nonsense another time. Just ask.

But what *does* it mean? How *does* it apply to us in our situations?

I think I'd say it talks about the possessions we already have - "wealth" - and what we receive: wages, pension, pocket money, allowance, whatever - "firstfruits". "Firstfruits" implies a more agricultural society, and most of us don't have an obvious equivalent nowadays to the time when the crops start to ripen, with the promise of a full harvest a little while down the line.

My first comment would be to notice the word *honour*. It is a bit vague - just as it is in that commandment about honouring parents. So it will apply differently to different people in different circumstances. But the overall objective is the same, to *honour* God.

So how can we "honour" God with what we've already got, and what we have coming in? Just at the most basic level, hasn't it got to involve involving God in your choices? Checking out if there are things that *he* has said about how to use such things? And an immediate application of that is that it is not down to us to just do precisely what we fancy doing with these things. If we are calling ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ, if we dare call him "Lord", it must mean he is the *Lord* of our wallet or purse or online account.

And I think it's pretty clear from what Proverbs 3 says, that we are to "honour" God with some of that money or possessions by not keeping them for ourselves.

I'm not going to specify percentages, because I think it relates a whole lot more to what we would call "disposable" income. Some people could easily give well over that "tithe" figure of 10 percent that you've probably heard of, and others couldn't manage anything like it. But, even so, it's not a bad figure to start thinking about.

And I'm not going to split hairs about *what* we give whatever we give to. In our situation, it's pretty obvious that this church has certain fixed expenses, and I have to be wary how I say all of this because I'm the foremost of those.

But folks, can I just ask whether you have ever sat down and thought (as well as prayed) about how you are going to *honour* God by giving? Have you ever thought how you could encourage yourself, over the years, to develop a spirit of *joyful* giving?

I think I was really fortunate, on this point, to have been converted as a teenager, when I just had pocket money coming in. I could learn to not consider that *all* as just *mine*, when it wasn't really a huge deal. But it made it a whole lot easier when I started earning something like real money at Roddas' during my gap year, and that made it easier for when I started to get more like a man-sized salary working in the labs in the years that followed.

And if your situation changes - as it has quite substantially for Jenny and me in the last few months - what are our first thoughts? Do those thoughts *honour* God? Do they first veer towards, Great, now I can *get* ...? Or, great, now I can *give* ... ?

- **Discipleship: discipline** (11-12)

My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

(Proverbs 3:11-12)

This is pretty much picked up and quoted verbatim in Hebrews, in the NT. But I'm not sure that hearing it *twice* makes it a whole lot easier to hear *at all*. It is a really difficult one. Hardship is, well, *hard* and unpleasant. Whereas, don't we sometimes feel, following Jesus shouldn't require so much effort ... surely?

Folks, I don't know what you've been doing to keep fit during lockdown. My exercise classes at

Carn Brea Leisure Centre

Have been cancelled for months. They're trying to open up again now, and I will be checking that out soon. But in the absence of getting to that building to work out, we've bought some

Home exercise kit

And I can assure you that swinging those bits of metal around our dining room has still been hard work. Wood-chopping and lunges and biceps curls *hurt*. And if it wasn't for some kind of exercise video on a bit of screen technology in front of me, I don't think I'd have pushed myself so much.

So can we see Proverbs and Hebrews as something like the voice of the person in front of the exercise class, calling us to keep going with those painful pursuits. There are times when I grunt with the effort. There are times when I am panting for breath. And those are worth doing, I keep being reminded by that trainer, because there is a *purpose* to all of this.

Spiritually speaking, the reward is not maintaining physical health, or developing bulging biceps, but growth in grace. Becoming more like Jesus, whose arduous path we are called to follow. There is a purpose: that of developing the family likeness, which will delight our heavenly Father. In fact, the training is a sign that you *are* children of that heavenly Father; it is a training regime that *he* has designed for *our* benefit. We just need to remember one of those earlier verses from Proverbs 3 before we read on in Hebrews 12.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.

(Proverbs 3:5)

Will we trust, actively *put* our trust, that he knows what he is doing - and act on that

trust as our lives, rather than our muscles, ache from the effort?

Admittedly a bit contra-intuitive, but this is a sign of his love:

“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, ...”

(Hebrews 12:6)

It is a sign of your legitimacy. You are part of the *family* of God:

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.

(Hebrews 12:7)

And the objective is worthy:

... he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

(Hebrews 12:10-11)

Folks, it really is a question of whether you do indeed

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.

(Proverbs 3:5-6)

Will you trust him to guide your steps on the paths he is preparing for your feet this week?