

One of my favorite places to go is Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma. I get to walk, hike, climb, and decompress. And while it's not the Rockies, there is some challenging terrain to navigate and some perilous spots that could end very badly for you if you take a wrong step. Thankfully you're not left to figure it out on your own. Throughout the park are several things to aid you along your way. There are well-worn, carved out paths that show how others successfully traveled before you, markers on trees and rocks to tell you where to go next, and hand and foot holds to show you the way. All of these act as, what I would call, guidelines. And all are given so that you can arrive at your desired destination.

When we hear the word "guidelines", most of us probably think about things found in a policies and procedures manual. But guidelines are so much more. Guidelines can be found in art, architecture, stage design and, in my adventures, amongst rocky terrain, all used to lead us to our desired destination. Guidelines can also be found in the pages of Scripture.

This morning, we begin a series in the book of Proverbs called *Guidelines*. We are going to study that ancient book with ancient ideas about how to live our lives, and I believe it's as relevant today as it has ever been. You see, you and I live in the Information Age. I did some research this week and found some numbers about the amount of data, information, we have and access every day. There are 2.5 quintillion bytes of data produced every day. That's a number that ends with 18 zeroes. That's 250,000 Libraries of Congress, 530,000,000 downloaded songs, and 90 years of HD video. That's how much data we produce every day. We have exponentially more information and knowledge available to us than ever before. But a quick glance at the world shows that we are far from having it all figured out. We can't get along with one another. Families are a mess. Evil and injustice seem to take more ground daily. Knowledge may be power, but if it's misapplied, things get messy. We may know more than ever before, but it won't make a difference if we fail to understand what it means. **Our world is full of knowledgeable fools.**

And that's where the book of Proverbs comes in. If I was to sum up this book in one word, it would be "wisdom". The book of Proverbs was written to pass on wisdom from one generation to the next. If you've read it, you know it is full of pithy statements that act as guidelines, as well-worn paths charted by someone else and given so that, when we arrive, we know which way to go. Proverbs is not a book of promises or commands. 11:8 says "The righteous is delivered from trouble, and the wicked walks into it instead." In eternity, that's a promise. On earth, that's not always true, but it is generally true. The ideas in this book are best practices, rules of thumb, guidelines that address the vital topics of life like relationships, money, family, work, justice, and power that you and I need help navigating.

So this morning, as a way to introduce this book and really to set the stage for this entire series, I want to answer four questions about wisdom. What is it? Where do we get it? How do we get it? And what happens when we get it?

Wisdom is practical skill for daily living. Proverbs is full of ideas you and I can use in our life today. Solomon introduces us to the book and the meaning of wisdom.

[Proverbs 1:1-6] ¹The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: ²To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, ³to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; ⁴to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— ⁵Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, ⁶to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.

The Hebrew words for wisdom and wise, *hokma* and *hakam*, are used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe craftsman who built things like the tabernacle and the temple. This gives us an idea about wisdom. Wisdom is the skill we need to craft and build the life God has for us.

Wisdom traffics in ideas like righteousness, justice, and equity. It is not some trivial pursuit but deals in matters near and dear to God's heart. Wisdom is instruction for how to live our life. That means there is a right way, a better way. The premise of Proverbs flies in the face of the world's insistence that each of us have our own truth and our own best pathway.

Solomon uses multiple words to help us understand what wisdom is. Wisdom brings **insight**, an ability to discern between multiple choices. What road, job, or spouse should I take? Wisdom enables **discretion**. Discretion is foresight, the ability to plan and live strategically. It's anticipating, knowing what to do and when to do it. Some of you know Bob Breunig, a member here and former Cowboys player. He tells of the time during his rookie year where Coach Landry told him that, at some point, the game would slow down, and he'd see the whole field. He'd see what's coming and be able to move accordingly. That's discretion. Wisdom is also **guidance**. What does a guide do? Shows you the way. But this is not a passive guided tour through our lives. Wisdom walks with us as we scale Mt. Everest. It requires our participation.

Perhaps the simplest way to define wisdom, particularly in light of the vast amounts of information we have, is this: Knowledge is knowing the right thing to do. Wisdom is doing it. Wisdom takes what we have learned and properly applies it to our lives. **James 1:22 – Do not merely listen to the word and deceive yourselves. Do what it says.** Wisdom is only wisdom when we put it to work in our lives. That's why we call it a skill. But the understanding and motivation to live wisely doesn't come just from what you know. It comes from who you know.

Wisdom is the product of a devoted relationship. We can very easily look at the book of Proverbs as a user manual or to-do list, but the counsel found within emanates from a relationship with our Creator. After telling us what wisdom is, Solomon tells us where to get it.

[Proverbs 1:7] The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The wisdom of every person, the way in which they navigate their life, all starts with their view of God. The prerequisite to a wise life, as defined in the Bible, is the fear of the Lord. Any time we come to a passage that speaks of it, and it shows up 18 times in Proverbs, it's good for us to pause to understand what it is and what it isn't.

This fear is not terror. Terror is based on the expectation of punishment and what needs to be done to avoid it. It is self-focused. The fear of the Lord is different. It is the recognition of who God is (holy), who we are before him on our own (fallen and separate), and what he has done to remedy our condition (salvation through Christ). When we fear, we grow in our understanding and appreciation for who God is and what he's done for us and we respond in reverence, trust, worship and obedience. As our fear of the Lord grows, so does our desire to live a life that is pleasing to him. It motivates us to live a God-centered life, fearful of dishonoring or grieving him, not because we are afraid of punishment, but because we love him so much. It is not about rules to follow. It's about a relationship to honor. And as we do, God gives generously to us.

[Proverbs 2:6-8] ⁶For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; ⁷he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, ⁸guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.

The God who made the world and ordered the world also tells us how to navigate our lives in that world. We should probably listen to him, but we'll only do so if we fear him and believe that the guidelines he gives us are, far and away, the best course of action. If you are displeased with the way your life is going, consider what your view of God is and what place he has in your heart and life. It's only when we fear him that we'll recognize his Word as wisdom and be motivated to apply it fully to our lives.

Wisdom is the prize of a dedicated search. Wisdom is not just deposited into our hearts and heads as we sleep. It is something that is hard won.

[Proverbs 2:1-5] ¹My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, ²making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; ³yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, ⁴if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, ⁵then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

This passage makes it clear that you and I have a significant part to play in obtaining wisdom. We are called to receive, treasure, make, incline, call, seek. Wisdom is not just not given to you. It's something that must be sought after, a lifetime journey, that involves the combination of time, experience, and humble evaluation.

Time and experience go together. Think of the five wisest people you know, then come up with their average age? Young people are rarely described as wise. And, if they are, it's usually "He/she is wise for their age." Think about movies where there's a young king or queen. They are always surrounded by folks much older than they are who have spent years pursuing and obtaining wisdom. What are the leaders of the church called? Elders. And think about Gary. I'm not calling him old, but he has moved on to a sage stage. All of these people have spent a long time doing what they are do, and they've seen it all.

But that's not enough to grow in wisdom. There are plenty of old fools. The last part is humble evaluation, done through the lens of the fear of the Lord. It is only when we assess how our experiences and choices measure up to the will of God that we will grow in wisdom.

But all of this is meaningless unless we address the most important word in this passage: If. If you receive, if you call out, if you seek it. Wisdom is ours for the taking, but we must have a genuine desire to grow in it. Do I want to do this God's way or do it my way? The more we choose God's way, the more capable we'll become of answering the most basic, but most essential, question: Is this wisdom or folly? Is this wise or foolish?

Wisdom is the pathway to a different life. Every follower of Jesus is called to be holy, to live a life set apart from the way the world lives their lives, to live the abundant life. We will accomplish this when we apply the wisdom of God to our lives.

[Proverbs 2:9-22] 9 Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; 10 for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; 11 discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, 12 delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, 13 who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, 14 who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, 15 men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways. 16 So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, 17 who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God; 18 for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed; 19 none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life. 20 So you will walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous. 21 For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it, 22 but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.

I told you earlier this wasn't a book of promises, but I'm confident if we run hard after God, calling out for his wisdom, these things will happen, and our lives will be different because of it.

Every year an organization called The World Happiness Report puts out a "General Happiness Survey", and their recent findings aren't encouraging. Other than 2008, when we were in the midst of a financial meltdown, US adults have never been less happy. Isn't that fascinating? How is it that, given our advancements in technology, standard of living, and abundance of knowledge, the satisfaction in our lives is decreasing sharply? All this information, all of these ideas of how to live our lives just isn't working. And while I'll submit that it's not all about happiness, a fulfilling life is something fewer and fewer are experiencing. Perhaps it's because, as we move away from God, we fear him less and begin to chart our own path. We understand and apply less of his wisdom. The results, as you see, are compelling

Does a life lived by what Proverbs says guarantee non-stop happiness? No. But I would say with confidence it will be one full of satisfaction, and it will look much different than the lives reflected in this depressing study. The wisdom of God is the pathway to the abundant life.

When you and I understand wisdom, when we take it to heart, we change. Wisdom is more than a mental exercise. It's more than awareness. It's absorption. It impacts the core of who we are. It aligns the affections of our hearts with the affections of God's heart.

As our affections change, so do our actions. We head down a different path in life, “every good path”, as Solomon describes it. Wisdom guides us in that direction. It protects us from making poor choices, it resists our temptation to sin, and delivers us from the evil that would come. As we fear God, wisdom guides us to live a life pleasing to him.

And as we live that way, we will be blessed. You see the upright will inherit the land. That doesn't mean much to us, but to a Jew in Solomon's day, it meant everything. It meant fulfilling the purpose for which God established Israel, to be a people unto him and a blessing to the world. We too are a people unto God, a spiritual house, a royal priesthood, called to be the Church, and individually called to something unique. If you believe in this God-given purpose stuff, know that wisdom will be your guide to live a different life, one with fulfillment and joy.

You know, I often close with a story to bring the point of the sermon home, and I'm going to do that again this morning, but it's going to be a little different. You see, this story is a story about you. I can't tell you the details because it hasn't happened yet. But here it goes: at some point this week, or in the next few weeks, you're going to have a decision to make. Maybe you already know what it's going to be about. You are going to find yourself on a path and the terrain will begin to get rocky and your footing will be less sure, and you're going to be looking for help, looking for a guideline to see where to go next. You're going to be looking for wisdom. So read the book. Listen to the sermons. And get wisdom.

And remember this: if you search for it and you cry out for it, you'll find it, because if you search for Him and cry out for Him, you'll find Him. That's because, when you get wisdom you get God.