

God's Plans, Your Plans

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[0 : 0 0] but if you'd like to follow along as I read them out, the first one is from chapter 11 on page 644 in the Church Bibles. So beginning at verse 3 of chapter 11.

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity. And in chapter 12, verse 5, the plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful.

And verse 15 says, the way of fools seem right to them, but the wise listen to advice. In chapter 15, verse 22, plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed.

And in verses 1 through 4 of chapter 16, to humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the proper answer of the tongue. All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord.

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans. The Lord works out everything to its proper end, even the wicked for a day of disaster.

[1 : 1 6] And verse 9 says, in their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps. Verse 25, there is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.

And in verse 33, the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. Chapter 21, verse 5, says the plans of the diligent lead to profit, as surely as haste leads to poverty.

And in chapter 27, verse 1, do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring. Thanks be to God. Great.

Well, hello. Good evening. Thank you, Hayley, for reading. Thank you, Darren, for leading, and to the band for leading us in worship. My name is Matthew Todd. I was a ministry trainee here at St. Silas one year ago, and I'm still a member, very much so, of this congregation.

I'm going to pray for us, and then we will look at these Proverbs together. Lord, we do thank you for the book of Proverbs. We thank you for the earthy, down-to-earth wisdom that it gives us for everyday life.

[2 : 4 0] And we pray that as we look today at our plans and your plans, and as we look at the ways that we can find guidance from these Proverbs, you would be speaking to us in a special way, that we would encourage us, and that you would inspire us to make these words applicable to our lives.

We do pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Great. Well, it is a great privilege to be bringing the Word of God to us tonight.

I do mean that sincerely. If you ever meet a preacher that doesn't think it's a privilege, you need to be questioning why they're doing it. So can I just say three things by way of introduction? Well, actually, before I say the three things, let me say I'm going to be spending about one-third of the sermon on the introduction, because really so much of what happens when we're studying Proverbs is just about how we frame the way that we look at them, and that's quite new for some of us.

So bear with me. The introduction is a good chunk of the sermon. But the introduction to the introduction, firstly, the format we're using today, let's get the boring stuff over first. I assume everybody has one of these sheets.

Yes? Great. So you will need that very much so, otherwise you'll just be frantically flapping back and forth in your Bibles all day. But trust me, it's all from the Bible. Thank you, Hayley, for making that very clear.

[3 : 59] And what we're doing today is quite different. We have our theme. The theme is our plans, God's plans. So it's very much looking at how we get guidance, how we make decisions, and what the Bible says about that.

But when you're looking at something thematically, it's a slightly different way of doing things, and it does need to be enjoyed as part of a balanced diet of what we call expository preaching and thematic preaching.

So our normal way of doing things at St. Silas would be that we would take a chapter, for example, of a book of the Bible, we would read the chapter, we work through the chapter and try and work out what it says.

Obviously, because the book of Proverbs is slightly different, the way we're approaching this is a little bit different as well. But I hope you'll agree thoroughly, biblical and helpful way of doing it, it's maybe just a bit different.

Secondly, I just want to say, on a personal note, that I kind of had to laugh out loud when I was told the topic that I'd been asked to preach on today, our plans, God's plans, because I'm terrible at trusting God's guidance.

[5 : 08] Most of you will know I'm a self-employed musician, and I also work part-time for a Christian's charity called Out of the Box. And over the last two years, I've been studying the Bible intensively at Cornhill, and I've also spent a year at St. Silas as a ministry trainee.

And so when you're trying to make all that work together and you're trying to work out, well, what does God want me to do with all that? It can be really quite difficult. My life has really been a chaotic sea of uncertainty from start to finish.

I cannot lie. So, but I do want to say that preparing this sermon has been hugely helpful and encouraging. And in that regard, I'm preaching to myself today as much as to anyone else.

And thirdly, can I just acknowledge at this stage that this is a topic that can divide opinion, sometimes dramatically so. Can I strongly encourage us to listen to one another and to God's word as we approach this?

It's deeply personal for many people. And please do speak to me afterwards if you need clarification on any of the points that I make. But I do hope and pray that you will find it encouraging and challenging as I have.

[6 : 15] So, as we begin, I want to present you with an image. And this very much frames our exploration. It frames the way that we think about Proverbs.

Please engage with it as much as you are able because it is an image that in a mysterious way encompasses the book of Proverbs. I would encourage you to close your eyes if that's helpful, if you're into that.

Nothing bad will happen. But don't feel that you have to. I'm going to tell you a wee story. Once upon a time, in a far-off kingdom, a powerful but kind king ruled with perfect wisdom.

And though his subjects and domain were fraught with difficulty and his enemies ever sought to pull him down, he ruled with total justice and compassion. You may think you know this king, but you don't.

It is not Solomon who wrote much of the book of Proverbs. Nor is it King Jesus, though of course it points towards him. He's a story, but not just a story. He's a truth, a vision, a proverb, if you will, that God has put into human hearts.

[7 : 31] Each of us has a longing for a perfect ruler who can bring clarity to our confusion and security to our fear. so let us watch him a little longer.

The king sighs as he sits at his desk and leafs through state documents. So many questions, so many complaints, so many demands on his wisdom. Suddenly, there's a noise at the door as the latch lifts hesitantly.

Who is it? Asks the king, trying to disguise his frustration. The door creaks open and the young prince stands in the doorway. I'm sorry, father, are you busy?

The king's face breaks into a beaming smile as he opens his arms. Never too busy for you, my child. What troubles you? The prince runs gratefully into his father's embrace. The world is confusing, father, and I don't know what to do.

I really need your help to make a choice. Hold that thought, if you would. We're going to look at this in two sections, roughly.

[8 : 39] Our plans and God's plans. So, just some ruminations on our plans and the way that we view these as Christians. So, I've no doubt that you've all been in that situation, if you are a Christian, where you've said to God, God, I really need you to help me make a choice right now.

And it's serious, isn't it? Of course it is. Not serious, not Siri. This is the problem with using iPads. It's serious. Of course it is. Do you take this job? Do you take the husband or wife?

Do I let my children do this thing? Do I choose this good and excellent thing or this other good and excellent thing? Do I follow my head or my heart? How do I discern God's sovereign will?

Well, the reason I took quite a lot of time to set the scene with that image of the king and the prince is because I do believe our thinking on wisdom is pretty confused in the 21st century, particularly in Britain.

How will the wise king respond to his son? Well, first of all, we know some ways that he is highly unlikely to respond if he is good and wise.

[9 : 50] Firstly, he is not likely to play mind games with his child, expecting him to pick up on subtle hints or obscure suggestions. And yet, so often we expect God to act in this way. We grope around searching for clues that God might be dropping, desperate for the guidance that he seems so reluctant to give.

Secondly, he is not likely to give a trite or confusing answer if his son is genuinely asking. And this also is attributed to God. God, because he is so much higher than us, we expect his guidance to be super spiritual or metaphysical.

And we might even struggle to accept an answer that looks like earthy common sense. And thirdly, and perhaps more subtly, a wise and loving father is not likely to turn to his son and say, this is what you must do.

And perhaps that is the truth that is hardest of all to swallow. But if we honestly engage with the image, we know this to be true. What then?

The king turns in his chair, abandons his work, and lifts the prince onto his knee. The world is confusing, my son. You're right about that.

[11 : 06] But let's see if we can't make some sense tonight. That's what a loving, wise father would do, surely. Did you have someone like that when you were a child?

Do you still have them now? If you did, thank God for them. They are one of his greatest gifts to us. If you never had such an experience, perhaps your heart is aching with the emptiness that has left.

But either way, there's great news. Our heavenly father is completely wise and supremely powerful. And he has given us a mighty gift in the book of Proverbs.

The wise king has gathered us onto his lap and he desires to fill us with his wisdom. Let's look at the first four Proverbs on your sheet, if you would.

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity. The plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful. The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.

[12 : 11] Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed. All these Proverbs have a very similar message, though taken from different angles.

And that is, in a sense, in effect, good people will make good choices. Let's be clear at this stage that Proverbs are truisms and not certainties. The Bible is very aware that there are significant exceptions to every rule.

We live in a fallen world that is tainted in every aspect. And there is other wisdom literature in the Bible that explores this in depth, particularly Job and Ecclesiastes. Sometimes Proverbs itself will point out the exception along with the rule.

But to try to confuse truth by consistently majoring on the exceptions is, if I can use this deliberately loaded word, foolish.

And this is something we need to be very aware of because it's a technique very often used in modern debates. People with a weak argument will often try to win by causing confusion and you end up with this kind of scenario.

[13 : 16] You might say the integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity. The foolish person will reply, every businessman or woman who has ever succeeded has known how to bend the truth.

True, but not what the Proverbs is saying. The plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful. But no one is righteous, so no one can be just. The way of the fool seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.

But you don't need advice from anyone, just follow your heart. Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed. But too many cooks spoil the broth, surely. Don't let anyone tell you what to do. I could go on.

You get the idea. We need to be on guard against this attitude. The Bible describes Satan as a deceiver. When Jesus was tempted before he began his ministry, it was with biblical truth wrongly applied.

But Jesus knew his Bible and his heavenly Father far too well to be enticed by half-truths. He understood the spirit of these Proverbs. It's not just the advice that matters, but also the person who's giving it.

[14 : 18] We're living in an age that delights in turning truth on its head and dismantling the very wisdom on which our civilization was built. If ever there was a time for Christians to be secure in the wisdom of the Bible, this is it.

But crucially, one of the effects of this chronic doubting is to paralyze us with indecision. When faced with difficult choices, we feel keenly the potential disastrous consequences of either decision.

We anticipate the people who will be offended, who will misinterpret, who will disagree. And increasingly, we don't know how to disagree well. The world would try to convince us that the decision you make, the people you choose to offend, don't just reveal your preferences, but are in fact your entire identity.

No wonder we struggle to make good choices. Proverbs warns us that this attitude is very much the domain of the fool. Such people, according to Proverbs, we read, are double-minded, deceitful, do whatever seems right to them, and don't listen to advice.

And let's just be clear, we're all born fools, but as we seek to be a little more like Jesus every day, we do become conformed to his image. Over time, we become people of integrity who, the flip side, love justice and listen to a wide range of advice.

[15 : 53] We must listen to such people in the hope that we can become like them. And we would be fools indeed if we didn't listen to the very words of the only perfectly wise king.

Matthew 12, 42, tells us that Jesus' wisdom is greater than the wisdom of Solomon. It is a tremendous privilege that we live in a time where Jesus' words and example are written down for us.

But beware, the more wise we become in God's eyes, the more foolish we will appear to the world. So with that in mind, let's think for a few minutes about God's plans.

And this, I guess, is where the rubber hits the road, if I can use that analogy, which I will come back to. We're going to look at the next few proverbs there starting from to humans belongs plans of the heart.

So to humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the proper answer of the tongue. All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord.

[17 : 02] Commit to the Lord whatever you do and he will establish your plans. The Lord works out everything to its proper end, even the wicked for a day of disaster. In their hearts, humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.

Let's just take a moment with these proverbs and let them do their work. Try and work out what the common thread is. So that wasn't very long, but I don't know how you got on with that.

On the surface, they all seem to make good sense, don't they? But you might find as you meditate on these proverbs that an uncomfortable tension arises. And this is an area where we as Christians frequently get it wrong, so brace yourselves.

How often have you said to yourself or a Christian brother or sister something along the lines of, I'm at crossroads, I really need to discern God's plan for my life right now, or I'm struggling to see how this is part of God's plan for me.

Now, I say that all the time, so there's nothing wrong with saying those things, but we do need to be careful about the mindset that perhaps is underneath them. Don't get me wrong, God absolutely has a plan, a huge plan.

[18 : 31] We read here, the Lord works out everything to its proper end. If that's not a plan, then I don't know what is. But we need to get this clear in our minds if we're to avoid generations of heartache.

Look at the emphasis in all these proverbs. And this is where perhaps it's a bit surprising. To humans belong the plans of the heart. Commit to the Lord whatever you do and he will establish your plans.

In their hearts, humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps. Now, I think it's so important we understand this.

Let me say that if you've had situations where you've clearly heard God's voice telling you what to do and you've done it, all power to you. I'm not, absolutely not my place to limit the ways in which God can and will give his guidance.

But I do want to suggest tonight that that is not the usual way that God guides us. And if that's all we're looking for and that's all we're waiting for, we will be likely, very, very likely, be bitterly disappointed.

[19 : 40] Your plans are your own. If that's not controversial, I don't know what is. But let me explain. If you want your plans to be more in line with God's plans, we do that by better understanding God.

The more we become like our Heavenly Father, the more we drink deeply of his wisdom, the more the choices we make will reflect the choices he would make. Now, remember what we were saying earlier about the secular world leaving us paralyzed with indecision.

Well, here's why. If you take the Lord out of decision making, you've taken away the one who's ultimately bringing about the consequences of the decision. So can you see that there?

That's consistently what every proverb is attesting to. Humans make the plans. God makes it happen. That's in many ways a reversal of the way we often think about it, isn't it?

We think that God's making the plans and it's our job to make it happen. It's the other way around. We're making the plans and he's making it happen. Look at the emphasis in these proverbs. To humans belong the plan of the heart but the Lord comes the proper answer from the tongue.

[20 : 50] All a person's ways seem pure to them but motives are weighed by the Lord. Commit to the Lord whatever you do and he will establish your plans. The Lord works out everything to its proper end even the wicked for a day of disaster.

In their hearts humans plan their course but the Lord establishes their steps. We find this very hard to get our heads around because we really struggle to accept both on one hand God's sovereignty and on the other our autonomy.

In other words God is totally and completely in control and yet we have full moral responsibility for our choices. It's possible that our human brains cannot quite reconcile this tension but the Bible has absolutely no issue with putting these together all the time.

there are countless stories but perhaps the most striking is the story of Joseph. Joseph's brothers made a plan to kidnap and sell their brother as a slave. Initially they were going to kill him.

It was an evil plan but through it God brought about the rescue of that whole family and indeed that entire region of the world through Joseph's leadership in Egypt.

[22 : 04] Now does that mean that it was God's plan after all so the brothers have no moral responsibility for their actions? Not at all. In their hearts humans plan their course but the Lord establishes their steps.

What it does mean is that we have a God who is so huge and so powerful and so lovingly and intimately involved in every aspect of our lives that it is laughable to think that our terrible choices can mess up his mighty plans.

Do you see the distinction there? It's a big difference when we get our heads around this. So what are the dangers of getting it the wrong way round? Well I'm going to suggest for you three ways that we can get this well two ways we can get it wrong and then perhaps one way we can get it right.

So the first way we might think of God coming back to the rubber hitting the road is God as the grumpy driving examiner. Some of you will know my experiences with grumpy driving examiners I can fill you in on that later.

So we think of God as the driving examiner and we are setting our driving test and so we look at the world around us and we think I am one bad choice away from messing this all up.

[23 : 15] If I get this wrong I might as well give up. God will be rendered powerless to save me by my poor decision making. Or alternatively we think of God as the bus driver and we as the passenger.

God's going to work all this out anyway so I can just do whatever the heck I want. I just need to wait this out. I think the way the Bible presents it is God as the 100% reliable sat-nav if such a thing were to exist.

We are driving the car. Sure I am quite happy with the analogy you know when we become a Christian we put God in the driver's seat but you know what the first thing he does is give it right back to us and he sits beside us.

Now what kind of sat-nav would if you take the wrong turning announce you have royally messed up turning off navigation. Of course it doesn't. It reroutes immediately.

It puts you back on track to your destination. No drama. It might take a few minutes longer but you will get there. And you know what some routes might be just as good as others.

[24 : 27] It might be six and a half a dozen you could say. Or sometimes the route might appear longer but the sat-nav knows things that you don't. Traffic or closed roads.

But you are making the decisions but you're not on your own. You just have to listen to what the sat-nav says and do as it says.

Now a pastoral word here. Have a look at the proverb just below these ones that says there is a way that appears to be right but in the end it leads to death.

So there are times when the sat-nav will say to you make a legal U-turn where possible. You see some choices we make are headed the wrong way down a one-way street.

You know the type I mean. Choices that get you addicted to alcohol, substances, gambling or pornography. Choices that will permanently damage the relationships of those close to you.

[25 : 39] Choices that are illegal. Choices that embrace sin. The problem with these choices is that eventually they take over and we find we're not even driving the car anymore.

So no matter what the sat-nav says we don't hear. And statistically there will be some of us here tonight perhaps many who are stuck driving full speed in the wrong direction.

Perhaps you think it's too late to turn around. That God can't reroute you from where you've ended up. And can I just encourage you to make tonight the night that you make that U-turn.

There is such joy in knowing that you are back on the road that leads to life. Don't miss out on that. Please speak to me or someone afterwards if we can pray for you if you want to talk.

So as we start to wrap this up let's look at the last proverbs there starting from the lot is cast. The lot is cast into the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord.

[26 : 58] The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty. Do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring.

So as we end I want to make a brief comment on success and failure which is what happens when we make decisions. When we make decisions we also need to live with the consequences and there are some principles in these proverbs that we need to take to heart.

The lot is cast into the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord. We don't have time to do a biblical exposition of lot casting in the Bible though it's a very fascinating subject.

Suffice to say the message here is that even the most seemingly random or arbitrary action is totally within God's control. Sometimes we ask for God's guidance as if he's reluctant to give it.

The reality is that you are standing in God's guidance right now. It surrounds you. You're swimming in it. Perhaps a prayer that would be more fruitful often would be Lord help me to believe that everything I do is in your sovereign plan.

[28 : 19] Help me to trust that I can't mess this up if I keep my eyes on you. Let's look at the second last one.

The plans of the diligent lead to profit. As surely as haste leads to poverty, your choices matter. And they matter all the more because God is working through them.

It is not that God needs us but, and this is just mind-blowingly staggering, God wants us. He has invited us to join with him in the work of bringing salvation to the world and revealing his glory to all mankind.

In fact, that is how he prefers to work, how he chooses to work. You, yes, you are useful to the God who made the universe.

So make your choices with awe and trembling but for pity's sake make your choices. Do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring.

[29 : 29] when you make good choices with God's guidance it's highly likely not necessarily definite but highly likely that you will experience miraculous success in all you do.

And I do not say that to encourage you but to warn you. If the Lord has blessed you then bless the Lord. Remember who establishes your steps.

The lamp is burning low as the young prince looks up at his father with heavy eyelids. The hours have slipped by as they've spoken together of pain and pleasure, of past, present and future, of the road that leads to life and the road that leads to death.

The king sighs as he gazes lovingly at his son. Well my child we've talked the evening away but I forgot. Didn't you say you had a choice to make? We never heard what it was.

The prince smiles and leans into his father. I can't even remember. I think I may have new choices to make now. The king laughs and heaves the boy back onto his feet.

[30 : 48] And is the world any less confusing? The prince lingers. only when you are near me to help me understand. Well as we go out tonight into a new week, please don't miss the privilege and the joy that is ours in Christ.

We have a loving and compassionate king and a father whose wisdom is nothing less than perfect. perfect. And he delights to give us good things.

We know this image is true even as evil people. As a father, even I like to give good things to my daughter. How much more so will the perfect father delight to give us good things?

He loves to guide us and he will never let us go. Commit to the Lord whatever you do and he will establish your plans.

Amen.