

The Way of Wisdom: Introduction

Psalm 37:25-40

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Good morning. It's great to be with you all this Sunday. For those of you who are new to our church, my name is John Song. I'm the pastor of youth ministries here at Columbia Presbyterian. And we welcome you here as we dive into our series Summer in the Psalms. If you have a child age four to 1st grade, you have the option of having your child stay here in worship with us or having your child attend children's worship downstairs as a way of instructing them and preparing them to enter into worship together as an intergenerational church. So, it's your child. You decide.

If you have a Bible or a Bible app, turn or tap to Psalm 37. And we will be reading and looking at the last 15 verses. So, we're picking up right where we left off earlier in the service and starting from verse 25. Now, while you're turning there, I want to explain a little bit about what my task is here today. You see, in the series, we're looking at different genres of the Psalms and understanding the song that they are trying to play. So, like jazz, classical, R&B, hip hop, the Psalms have a unique style to them that we need to understand if we wish to sing these songs correctly.

So, for the next two weeks, we will be looking at wisdom Psalms, the way of wisdom. And I have been tasked to give an introduction on what wisdom is in scripture, how the wisdom has played out in the Psalms, and then seeing how we can see Christ in these wisdom Psalms. This won't be your typical sermon in the sense that we would normally take a passage and go through it verse by verse, although we will try and do that a little bit later. But we will move around throughout scripture as we explore the genre of wisdom in the Psalms and how we see Christ in them. So, for all of you systematic theology folks, this is your day today. You are very welcome.

Let us read Psalm 37:25-40.

I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread. He is ever lending generously, and his children become a blessing. Turn away from evil and do good; so shall you dwell forever. For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his saints. They are preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell upon it forever. The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.

The wicked watches for the righteous and seeks to put him to death. The Lord will not abandon him to his power or let him be condemned when he is brought to trial. Wait for the Lord and keep his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on when the wicked are cut off. I have seen a wicked, ruthless man, spreading himself like a green laurel tree. But he passed away, and behold, he was no more; though I sought him, he could not be found.

Mark the blameless and behold the upright, for there is a future for the man of peace. But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the future of the wicked shall be cut off. The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their stronghold in the time of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Please pray with me.

Father, one of the great passages in scripture that you proclaim to us is that you say that if we lack wisdom, we should turn to you, the one who gives generously. We pray that you would grant us wisdom to hear from your word today about what it means to live wisely and how we can sing these songs of wisdom to the glory of your name. We pray that your Holy Spirit would speak to us now, that your words would speak not just to our minds but to our hearts. And it is in the name of the person of wisdom, your one and only Son, Jesus Christ, we pray these things. Amen.

Well, how many of you have ever been in a conversation where someone says, I'd like a penny for your thoughts. Now, in today's money, that's a rather insulting comment because the penny is essentially worth nothing. It takes more money to make a penny than it is to have a penny. So, meaning that if anyone is asking you for a penny for your thoughts, it probably says something about how much your friend actually values you. But we use this phrase which is in essence a wisdom thought because in the 16th century, when the quote was originated by a gentleman named Sir Thomas More, a penny could actually land you a seat at a theater, a night at a hotel, or a nice meal at a restaurant. This phrase comes because it speaks to the idea that wisdom, a penny for your thoughts especially from someone that you trust, means more than just your thoughts. It actually has value that could add significance to your life and a pathway to success.

I mean, that's something that the human heart has always sought after and desired, isn't it? I mean, we want more than just knowledge. Anyone can have knowledge, right? But we want wisdom. We want to know how to properly order our lives in a way that gives us the greatest fulfillment, greatest joy, greatest purpose in our lives. And by the way, we're willing to spend more than just pennies on this, aren't we? We spend billions and billions of dollars on seminars, books, training videos, celebrity personalities, whatever we can get our hands on manipulated by pitchmen, marketers, that will tell us that true wisdom can be found for three easy payments of \$29.99.

But if we really look behind the heart of that, that's the problem there isn't it? Therein lies the rub. The problem with wisdom and the way that we pursue wisdom is the thought that it can be found within ourselves, that we can control our own destinies, that we can be the author of our own stories, we can grab life by the horns and say to ourselves that we did it.

And for Christians especially, we are prone to treat the wisdom of scripture – this is the first point in your bulletin – much in the same manner. We think of the Bible as a self-help guide providing us little tips and tricks to live the great moral life, that prosperity and comfort are awaiting us if we just follow these five easy tips. We mistakenly claim – although this is nowhere in scripture – that God helps those who help themselves. A secular biblical scholar states that “The wisdom in scripture was the sufficiency of human virtue to achieve wellbeing in this life apart from divine assistance.” So, you see, this isn't just simpletons that believe this. This can also be Ph. D. scholars that look at scripture with this kind of lens. Maybe some of you are scoffing at that, but perhaps if we are to be honest with ourselves, functionally in our sin, in our selfishness, in our depravity, we may know this not to be true intellectually, but we live as though this is true. Our devotionals can sometimes be opening of a passage saying, this is what I should do, and closing our Bibles, thank you, Jesus, and we go on with our days.

But before we dive into the wisdom in the Psalms, we need to understand wisdom in scripture as a whole. How do we view wisdom in the Bible? Where do we begin? Well, it begins not with the trust in one's own ability to acquire knowledge or to make one's self great, but it begins with the fear of the Lord. Job 28:28, “And he said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom. And to turn away from evil is understanding.’” Proverbs 9:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” In other words, the source and the substance of wisdom comes from God Himself. And thus, any look into scripture – when we look at wisdom passages, when we look at the wisdom from the Proverbs, from Ecclesiastes, from the Psalms – it requires that our full dependence and reliance on the Lord for wisdom to be given to us, for us to grasp it, for us to apply it. It means that we have to abandon any kind of self-autonomy, self-sufficiency, self-bootstrapping our way to gain it.

James 1:3 puts it this way, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." Proverbs 28:26, "Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool. But he who walks in wisdom will be delivered," wisdom being God.

So, that's the foundation. With that foundation, there are three principles of wisdom in scripture that will guide our time here as we enter into our text for today. Number one, wisdom in scripture is situational, not absolute. What I mean here is that the text in which we have wisdom passages are meant to be for situations; they're not universal. You need to have wisdom in order to apply wisdom correctly. This is why we see in certain wisdom texts like the Proverbs that certain texts seemingly contradict each other.

Any look into the Proverbs, you'll notice that there are certain passages that seem to rub against each other if you were to examine them a little bit closer. For example, Proverbs 26:4 states that we "should not answer a fool according to his folly lest you be like him yourself." But the very next verse, Proverbs 26:5 says, "Answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own eyes." So, which is it? Is the Bible being hypocritical here? No. It's situational, not absolute. If we were to treat the wisdom sayings in scripture as absolutes, we would have a real big problem because then God's word would not be inherent anymore. It would not be infallible anymore.

But the key here is understanding wisdom is involving a situation. If a social media pundit is arguing with you, answer not according to his folly lest you become like him, and you will type in all caps, and you'll be calling everyone a snowflake. It will be tremendously bad for you. So, don't answer a fool according to his folly lest you become like him. But let's say you've got a friend who wishes to audition for *American Idol* and has never sang a tune in his life before, you need to answer a fool according to his folly so that he doesn't delude himself into thinking that he is somehow the next Adam Levine. It's situational, not absolute.

Principle two, your end goal matters. In other words, the wisdom that you use needs to have the correct end goal. It's different than the law of God, you see. The law of God, you always follow it. It's the right thing to do no matter what the end goal is. The law of God, thou shall not murder, thou shall not steal, all of the moral commands in scripture, no matter what your objective is, the ends do not justify the means if those means are not in step with the law of God. Do you hear?

Now, putting that aside, whenever the law of God is not violated, knowing the end goal makes the wisdom in scripture that you use incredibly important. Now, married couples here, if your arguing with your spouse, husband, if your end goal is peace, you are not using Proverbs 21:9, "Better to live on the corner of a housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife." If your end goal is to sleep on the roof of your house, then by all means, use that wisdom saying in which case if that was your end goal, well done. Your end goal matters when you use wisdom in scripture.

Number three, observations do not mean commands. There are often many times where wisdom in scripture is making an observation about a group of people. The wise, the unwise, the righteous, the unrighteous, the rich, the poor, the fool, these are means of understanding observationally what happens in their life, and that if you imitate that observation, it's wise. It's a wise observation. Or, if you go against a negative characteristic or a negative trait, it is wise for you not to follow in that step. But they shouldn't be seen as commands like we're treating it like the law of God, nor should we come to expect these passages of wisdom as promises from God in the way that the law is a promise.

Let me give you perhaps one of the most maligned verses in the evangelical church on this, a wisdom saying from Proverbs 22:6. Many of you are familiar with this. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." Many of you know that, but too often we treat a passage like this like law and we wonder, God, what's the deal? How come our children, although we've trained them up, do not confess saving faith? This is admittedly one of the things that I've fallen trapped to in youth ministry. God, I've spent seven years with these kids preaching, proclaiming, trying to help

them to understand the gospel. What gives? I thought that this was what your word is saying. And what I didn't realize in my youth was that this verse is a wisdom passage, not a law passage.

Now, before you start firing up emails claiming that I don't believe in training children, please allow me to explain here a little bit. Wisdom states that we need to train our children in the ways of the Lord, but it is not law in the sense that it guarantees that they will not depart from the faith. The mistake in treating a wisdom passage like a law passage is that it puts God on the hook; it holds God hostage. Does it mean that we shouldn't train our children? No, of course not. It's more wise to do so than not to. But as my professor of the Old Testament would say, we need to wear out our knees in prayer for our children, that God would work the Holy Spirit in their lives to have saving faith in them. Our full dependence and trust is not in our educational system, it is not in our Sunday school programs, it is not in what curriculum we use, it is the Holy Spirit that brings the gospel to light in our covenant children. It is not, I do this for you, God, therefore, you do this for me. But rather, it's something that calls for obedience and trust even if the outcome is something that we do not desire.

Wisdom that is in scripture observes behavior. That is indeed the wisest way to live and to trust in God, but that doesn't mean that we might run into trials or situations that run contrary to that wisdom. But it also doesn't mean that it isn't wise to follow it. We must trust God's words even when wisdom seems to hurt and affect us the most in our obedience. So, parents, keep on praying on. Parents, trust in your Lord and Savior despite the outcome knowing that this is the wisest course, that your works and labors have not been in vain.

Three principles, situational but not absolute, your end goal matters, and observations do not mean commands. With those three principles in mind, this leads us now to narrowing our scope from wisdom in scripture to wisdom in the Psalms. This is your second point in the bulletin.

If you see now that the beginning of wisdom starts and ends not with our activity but rather God's sovereignty and control, that it's much easier to see the rationale for why we should sing these kinds of songs to the Lord because the songs we sing shape the lives that we live. If you're into a specific style of music, it encompasses a certain worldview. If you're into hip hop music – I'm a big fan of hip hop – it influences your style and your dress. Snapback hats, joggers, the way you groove and dance, it's going to be different. If you're into classical music, button down shirts, sophistication, you hold up a wine glass with your pinky. This is you. You talk about tonic chords and the influence of Debussy on atonality, right? This is your world. You do you. That's the impact that music has. It shapes the liturgies that we live and breathe.

And it's no wonder that God then calls us to sing about His goodness and grace in the world. Colossians 3:16, one of my favorite verses in all of scripture, talks about it this way, "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." Just like all foundational songs that we teach to children about the world and the word, songs like "ABC," we talk about "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes," anatomy, we talk about lessons in futility, tiny spiders going up waterspouts. Our songs reflect wisdom.

And especially the songs that we sing in the church reflect the wisdom of Christ in our conduct, behavior, practice, and what we know and live in the world today. This is why it's appropriate, although our worship is centered on Christ, that we can sing lyrics with the words "I will" or "I am" or "I will do" in them. In fact, roughly a hundred of the Psalms in your Psalter have these kinds of self-focus. But the point in them is not to remain on the self. It's a teaching of wisdom for the self to center it back on the object of worship, the object of praise, the object of wisdom. Our songs teach in our culture both theology and doxology, and likewise, so does the Psalter. So, when we sing things in wisdom, singing about our activity, I will do this, I will lift up my hands, I will clap, I will shout for joy all the earth, all these things that the Psalm is teaching us, we're centering our theology and doxology back to the Lord.

So, this is also why we should be really careful about the kind of music that we digest. There is no such thing as music that is neutral. And so, we have to be able to examine songs and be able to say, what's the theology here? What's its doxology? When Ariana Grande tells us that we should break up with our boyfriends, there's a theology and a doxology behind that. The theology: God doesn't care about who you are with. Doxology: break up with your girlfriend. Think about what you're listening to and how it's shaping you, how it's shaping your worldview.

The Psalm book is worship in the sense that it's creating a structure of theology about God and His glory, and the singing is a response on how the people of God should act upon it. So, again, how this shapes our practice even on a Sunday morning, the lyrics that we sing matter. Now, these songs aren't theology textbooks. They aren't and we shouldn't treat them as though they should be. But they do need to declare the truths of Christ, His saving work on the cross for our sins, His resurrection showing us the new life that we have in Him, the glories of the awaiting kingdom when our physical lives here fade away and we return to be with Him. These are the beauties and the truths of the songs that we sing that the Psalter brings out and should be a part of our doxology as a church.

And so, this means that the songs that we choose need to have intentionality which is why here at CPC, we want to choose songs that are both rooted in tradition, but we also want to be faithful when the Lord says, sing a new song, all the earth. Songs don't have to be in 16th century language to be considered reverent, nor does every new song necessarily need to be accepted just because it's culturally new and relevant. Songs connect us to a God of the past, to the God of the present, and the God of the future. That's what the Psalms try to highlight for us. And the wisdom of the Psalms do the exact same things.

But when we look at our Psalter, which of these Psalms are wisdom Psalms? Well, scholars generally tend to agree that the wisdom Psalms of the five books of the Psalter include but not are necessarily limited to these – and if you want to do devotionals this week on wisdom Psalms, here they are – Psalm 19 which speaks on the wisdom of blessing and creation, Psalm 119 – if you want to do a really long devotional – the wisdom found in the commands of God, Psalm 127 and 128 which speak of the wisdom of family and the blessing that they will bring, Psalm 133 which speaks on the community and the wisdom found in community. Psalm 1, Psalm 49, Psalm 73 which is going to be our text for next week as we dive in deeper to a specific example, Psalm 112, all of those Psalms speak about the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. And of course, our text here today, Psalm 37.

Given these principles, wisdom in scripture, wisdom in the Psalms, let's put this all together in our text in Psalm 37 here today in these last 15 verses. Now that we've taken this systematic view of wisdom in scripture, for all you expository preaching levels, I haven't forgotten about you. Here we go. Let's apply this now.

This is how we understand wisdom in our text. Verse 25 when it talks about the fate of the righteous, it's not meant to state that the righteous will never starve or be in situations that would seem as though they have been forsaken by God. Again, it's a principle. It's situational, and it helps us to see the righteous who live wisely will generally live in a place where they are generous, their children are a blessing to those around them. It's an observation of the righteous and who they are. Likewise, verse 27, turning away from evil. It's not meant that trial will never come, nor disaster never come upon those who are righteous, but rather in wisdom, turning away from evil is a way to preserve the life that God has given to you in trusting Him.

Verse 28, the preservation of the saints and the children and the wicked shall be cut off forever does not mean that there are not times and places where it seems like the wisdom are triumphant. Actually, when we go into Psalms of lament, we see that very, very pronounced. But rather, wisdom calls us to recognizing that trusting in the Lord means holding onto the eternal spiritual reality of the Lord keeping and holding His sheep even when circumstances don't seem like it. Likewise, situationally, those who are situationally wise will be like the one whose step do not slip, verse 31, and will be acquitted because they are deemed to be righteous in living, verse 32 and 33.

Wisdom means looking for the correct end goal in waiting for the Lord and keeping His way so that we may, by His grace, look on while the wicked are cut off in verse 34. Verse 35, we see the observation of the wicked seeming to prosper like a green laurel tree, but rather in judgment, it becomes no more as so many of our life experiences teach us. The wicked do not stand prosperous. Meanwhile, the future for the righteous remains secure, verse 37. And then we see a restatement of the wicked's fate in 38.

Thus, those who look to live wise in righteousness, they have their salvation in the Lord, verse 39, and the Lord helps them and delivers them from the wicked and saves them because they take their refuge in Him. And that is why although these songs seem to be self-centered, they are rooted in the wise activity that, in verse 40, that the Lord helps them and delivers them. He delivers them from the wicked and saves them because they take their refuge in Him ultimately. When we look at wisdom passages and activity, it's always centered on the God of salvation and the God of truth.

Well, we're done, right? A bit of a problem here. And this is our third point. As you know, you've seen here that there's a bit of a problem when I've just talked about all this wisdom here. Although the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and even if we understand what wisdom is and the source and what we're supposed to do in light of that, even if we understand these categories and these principles of wisdom, we still have an issue in the nature of who we are apart from a savior. We, apart from the salvation from our Lord Jesus Christ, cannot have any hope of singing this song or any other wisdom song. We are slaves to our sin living unwisely, living in folly. We have no hope of doing this save from a wonderful, merciful savior that enters into human history.

I am of course speaking of the one that Colossians 2:3 says, "The one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." I am speaking of our great savior the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, the access for us to sing these songs comes from the one whose perfect life covers our unwise life, the one whose perfect righteousness was given to us on the cross when He died for our sins, died for our folly, and He rose again on the third day to show His victory over the grave. It is Christ and His wisdom, the treasure of all wisdom, that sings this song over us so that we may sing it and we can rightfully sing it. No matter how you come to church today, you can sing these songs with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength because you are united to this Jesus. That is how you are able to sing today.

The reformed theologian Mark Furtado in his commentary on the Psalms puts it this way.

"The life of wisdom set forth in the book of Psalms is an ideal life that we do not live out in reality. There is someone, however, who has lived this ideal life everyday and everywhere, Jesus Christ. Christ not only lived out this life of wisdom for himself, but also for us."

That's the power and beauty of the gospel, isn't it? It is a wise life received and lived out by grace. This is why every Psalm that we sing in some sense and in some degree is a messianic Psalm because we are reminded in Luke 24 that everything, including these Psalms of wisdom, reflects the Christ who has become for us wisdom in God, righteousness in sanctification, and redemption, as 1 Corinthians 1:30 says. It is in Psalm 37 where Satan and his transgressions, where the wicked of the world that seems oft so strong, when our flesh assails us, all that is crushed underneath Christ and the cross of Christ by taking on the curse for us. He is our refuge and our strength. It is Christ who enables us in this passage to be the righteous that shall inherit the land and dwell upon it forever. It is Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in us to help us walk in a way that our steps do not slip. It is Christ who will not forsake His saints because He is the good shepherd who guards and protects His sheep. It is Christ who is ever lending generously.

As the children of God and somehow in some way, as we sing the Psalm, we as the children of God can be a blessing on a broken and wicked world. When we look at this Jesus, it's this Christ who provides us our daily bread. It is Christ who is our salvation, our deliverer, our redeemer, our refuge, our great

reward, our hope, our righteousness, our king of kings, our Lord of Lords who lives in glory seated on the throne to be claimed and worshipped forever and ever, amen.

Christian, is that your hope? Is that what you believe? Is that what wisdom means to you? This is why we sing. And this is why we proclaim wisdom when we sing. We are proclaiming the holy act of a Christ who is wisdom and brings us to a place of worship in remembering what Christ has done for us. This is the power of the believers here who are all in some way projecting the image of God. As we gather together as a church on Sunday mornings, as more of the image of God is singing about His praises and lifting His name up high that we can then go out into the world and be image bearers living wisely in the wisdom of God trusting in Christ as our savior.

So, we'll get an opportunity to do that. We're going to close in prayer, and when we do, we will sing. As a command from God, let us sing about these glories about who Christ is, about Christ who is our wisdom. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that you not only tell us who you are, but you give us wisdom to navigate through all the trials and situations in life. Lord, your word is sufficient for us. But in that, let us not seek our own self-sufficiency. Lord, let us learn to live wisely because Christ, your one and only Son, has done it for us. Let us be who we are in Jesus Christ. And Father, as we are now about to sing the song that proclaims the majesty of who you are, the majesty of your word in Revelation, let us know that we can sing these songs with our heart because Christ has purchased it with His blood on the cross. And Christ has given us new life in His name. Lord, we thank you for this time together. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.