

## THE WAY OF WISDOM: ANCIENT PATHS FOR THE NEW YEAR #1 (Pete Greig)

- Where have you seen God at work in your life over the Christmas and New Year season? (Share any brief examples and encouragements).
- Was there anything from Sunday's message which you found particularly inspiring or challenging?
- Was there anything else you particularly noticed?

### Jeremiah 6:16

*This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls...'*

### Proverbs 1:1-9

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:*

<sup>2</sup>*for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight;*

<sup>3</sup>*for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour, doing what is right and just and fair;*

<sup>4</sup>*for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young –*

<sup>5</sup>*let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance –*

<sup>6</sup>*for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.*

<sup>7</sup>*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

<sup>8</sup>*Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.*

<sup>9</sup>*They are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.*

In many ways the whole Bible is a book of wisdom; it shows us the kind of world we are living in and how to live well whatever we may encounter in life. However, there are three books in the Bible which are most naturally to be understood as 'Wisdom Literature'. These are the books of **Proverbs**, **Ecclesiastes**, and **Job**.<sup>1</sup>

'Wisdom', as Pete Greig observed (and I think we can probably agree), 'is in short supply in our world.' It seems like something we could all do with a little more of at the start of 2023. Tim Mackie suggests that the Wisdom books show us three different faces of wisdom. The Book of **Proverbs** has the face of a brilliant young teacher. "These are the boundaries", wisdom says. "If you love God and live right, you will prosper and everything will go well for you."<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes and Job have the face of hard-won and painful experience. They give what theologian Walter Brueggemann calls 'counter testimony'. It's like learning physics at school. You're told one thing about, let's say, atomic particles and the next year your teacher says, "You know what we said last year. Well, it wasn't wrong, it's just more complicated."

The great test of wisdom is the ability to "anchor ourselves in the comfort of the sages" and to trust God when it gets complicated. As Teresa of Avila said, "Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you. All things pass away; God never changes; patience obtains all things. He who has God finds he lacks nothing; God alone suffices."

Horatio Spafford was a prominent lawyer and businessman in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Chicago. He was also a devout Christian and a respected church elder. All seemed well until 1871 when his young son died, and he lost almost all his investments in the great Chicago fire. In 1873 he planned to travel to England with his wife and family to help support evangelist D. L. Moody's preaching campaigns. Delayed on business, he sent his family ahead, planning to follow them soon after. But, crossing the Atlantic, all four of his daughters drowned following a collision with another ship. Later, as he passed the point in the ocean where his girls had been lost, he began to pen the hymn "It Is Well with My Soul"<sup>3</sup>

- *What complications or contradictions are you facing right now?*
- *Is it well with your soul? (Really?)*
- *Where have you found fresh (or ancient) wisdom recently? What wise advice has particularly helped you?*
- *Is there a particular area in your life where you need wisdom today? (James 1:5)*
- *How might we pray for wisdom for one another?*

<sup>1</sup> There is a case to be made also for the inclusion of Psalms and the Song of Solomon in this category. The deuterocanonical books of Wisdom and Ben Sirach (Ecclesiastes) are also written in the style of 'Wisdom literature'.

<sup>2</sup> You can watch the the BibleProject **Proverbs** video again here: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/wisdom-proverbs/>

<sup>3</sup> For the words to the hymn and more of Spafford's story see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It\\_Is\\_Well\\_with\\_My\\_Soul](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_Is_Well_with_My_Soul)