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# Fainting, Faking and the Sweetness of Wisdom

## Proverbs 24:10-14

**Introduction** An old recipe for rabbit stew starts off saying, “First catch the rabbit.” I like the simplicity and wisdom of this saying; for it starts off putting first things first. Without the rabbit there will be no stew. The obvious question that initially confronted me when asked to preach from the book of Proverbs on relationships was, “What shall I talk about? What specific relationship should I focus on and what angle on relationship shall I take? And from what passage of the Proverbs should I draw my sermon?”

So, the first thing I did to prepare for tonight was to read the book of Proverbs prayerfully and carefully. I noticed that 31 chapters of this book address relationship. It is filled to overflowing with people living with people under their Creator. It also reflects life as messy and loud and dangerous and happy and peaceful and successful. It locates life in community and says that relationship is delightful and distressing. It calls us to reflect upon what life truly is and how it operates. It never treats relationship as simple and two dimensional. Rather, relationship seen in the book of Proverbs is complex and robust.

The second thing I did in preparation for this message was to think upon what God has been highlighting for us recently here at Clearcreek. I thought upon the first few chapters of Genesis and Russ’s messages. I was reminded about God’s design to fill the Earth with His goodness and glory through His creation. I reminisced about man’s duty in relationship; namely to gladly be fruitful and multiply and thus preserve and promote God’s glory throughout all the Earth. I thought upon the intrusion of sin and how it perverted the purpose of relationship. Desire to kill rather than keep watch over God’s people can be seen in Cain who said, “Am I my brother’s keeper”?

I also revisited January’s teaching and the pleasures and pressures of rearing children. It seemed clear that watching out for each other for the sake of God’s supremacy and our safety was the point. I thought upon what we’ve been going through in Bible class on Sunday morning. Keeping watch over each other through relationships is an essential and ongoing topic for us as a family of believers. The accent for the first part of 2005 seems to be on living with each other carefully, prayerfully, sacrificially, joyfully, lovingly; in other words, living redemptively for the glory of His reputation and good of His congregation.

By pondering the book of Proverbs and reflecting upon Clearcreek Chapel I “caught the rabbit”. I began to see what specific angle on relationship I should take and from what passage of the Proverbs I should draw my sermon.

Turn in your Bibles to Proverbs 24 as we take a look at vv.10-14 and how God’s New Covenant promise is carried out in His New Covenant Community. (Pray)

Have you ever been frightened by the thought that you will not make it through the difficulties and deceptions of this life; that you will become a church statistic of shipwrecked faith (1Tim.1:19)? A couple of months ago I got a phone call from a dear brother in Christ who mentioned that in moments when he catches glimpses of remaining sin in his heart he fears that he will veer off and pursue sin and not make it to the end and thus be saved (Matt.10:22).

It's easy to identify with him isn't it? If we were left to our own powers to persevere, we all would end in ruin. We would all run after deceptive delights and dine with the devil in damnation. Beloved, we must hear precious truths like:

- He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion (Phil.1:6)
- Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy (Jude 24)
- I will put the fear of me in their hearts that they may not turn from me (Jer.32:40)
- The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen (2Tim.4:18).

Are you anxious that you will not make it through the difficulties and deceptions of this life? These stunning promises on which our confidence grows and upon which our souls rest need to be heard! But we must do more than perceive sounds of truth. We must by faith understand and participate in how these truths are carried out by the dependable power of God's sovereign grace.

Tonight's subject is *how the Lord upholds His promises to his people through His people.*

How does the Lord "keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy"? What is the context in which the Lord who "began a good work in you" will bring it to completion? Let's look together at Proverbs 24:10-14.

**IF YOU FAINT IN THE DAY OF ADVERSITY, YOUR STRENGTH IS SMALL. RESCUE THOSE WHO ARE BEING TAKEN AWAY TO DEATH; HOLD BACK THOSE WHO ARE SUMBLING TO THE SLAUGHTER.**

**IF YOU SAY, "BEHOLD, WE DID NOT KNOW THIS," DOES NOT HE WHO WEIGHS THE HEART PERCEIVE IT? DOES NOT HE WHO KEEPS WATCH OVER YOUR SOUL KNOW IT AND WILL HE NOT REPAY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS WORK?**

**MY SON, EAT HONEY, FOR IT IS GOOD, AND THE DRIPPINGS OF THE HONEYCOMB ARE SWEET TO YOUR TASTE. KNOW THAT WISDOM IS SUCH TO YOUR SOUL;**

**IF YOU FIND IT, THERE WILL BE A FUTURE, AND YOUR HOPE WILL NOT BE CUT OFF.**

What I want to focus on tonight is redemptive relationships. That is, I want us to see that the context in which God's promised work of rescuing us and renewing us and restoring us is redemptive relationships. What I see in our passage for tonight are three central things about redemptive relationships. I will treat them under these headings.

1. Redemptive Relationship Responsibilities
2. Redemptive Relationship Weakeners
3. Redemptive Relationship Strengtheners

## Redemptive Relationship Responsibilities

Let's begin thinking on Redemptive Relationships as we notice its responsibilities. We see this in v.11. In v.11 we hear a command: RESCUE THOSE WHO ARE BEING TAKEN AWAY TO DEATH; HOLD BACK THOSE WHO ARE STUMBLING TO THE SLAUGHTER.

Redemptive relationships understand that we are our brother's keeper. Those indwelt by the Spirit are not Cain-like who have animosity against their brothers and sisters; who are motivated to kill rather than to keep each other. Verse 11 talks about a general responsibility of rescuing. Whether it is within our homes or within the Chapel, we are to keep watch over each other and intervene when danger arises. Redemptive relationships understand that God does not transform his people right away. He could. And we often wish he would. But for reasons known better to Him than to us he allows us often to stumble in our own remaining sin. And then calls upon His people to rescue His people by means of His grace. This is what we are talking about tonight. This is what we mean by Redemptive Relationships.

### The need for rescue

To understand *how the Lord upholds His promises to his people through His people* first look with me at the danger we all face. Whether we have been in the faith 20 yrs. or 20 days, someone wages a constant battle to deceive and harden our hearts. The language of verse 10 reminds the reader of the first part of the book of Proverbs; especially chapters 7-9. Look back with me at 9:13ff. Here we come across *Woman Folly* whose seductive speech tries to persuade those going straight on their way.

“The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town calling to those who pass by who are going straight on their way”.

What does she hope to accomplish? Look closely at vv.16-18.

“Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. And to him who lacks sense she says, “stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant”. But he does not know that the dead are there that their guests are in the depths of Sheol”.

We see the trance-like effect of listening to her voice by noticing 7:21-22,25-27.

“With much seductive speech she persuades him with her smooth talk she compels him. All at once he follows her as an ox goes to the slaughter... Let not your heart turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths, for many a vic-

tim has she laid low and all her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is the way to Sheol going down to the chambers of death”.

In a cacophony of advise there is a unifying voice; the voice of Lady Folly. Her aim is single. She desires to persuade those going straight on their way to turn and give her their affections. Her strategy is reflective of the garden scene of Genesis 3 and the crafty serpent. She wants to foster in professing believers a “sinful, unbelieving heart” (cf. Heb.3:12) so that we will doubt that God has our best interest at hand. Lady Folly aspires to convince us that we will be missing something good if we believe the Lord and follow His way (cf. Ps.84:11; Num.24:11). This voice portrays itself as sweet and agreeable; smooth and satisfying. The subjects Lady Folly gives counsel over are many. Things like:

- Sex
- Money
- Time
- Priorities
- Relationships
- Suffering

In these and others like them Lady Folly attempts to sway us into thinking self-centeredly and desire private and immediate gratification. We will use sex, money, time to serve our private and perverted agendas. We will view relationships merely horizontally and see how people exist to serve us. We will recoil at the thought of suffering and schedule everything to move in the opposite direction away from pain and problems and perplexity and move toward ease and safety and predictability.

With much seductive speech she persuades us and all at once we follow her as an ox goes to the slaughter (7:21f).

### The means of rescue

Beloved, believers in Jesus Christ needing rescued from sin is seen in this proverb. Life is not peacetime. War to win our allegiance has been issued. This is most vividly portrayed in Proverbs 24:11. It also is seen in Matt.18 where we notice not only the need for rescue but also the means of it. Turn with me to that familiar passage; Matt.18.

Here in Matt. 18 we come across God’s search and rescue mission. We notice how He cares for His people and will go to extraordinary effort to rescue the gone astray ones. Listen to this parable in vv. 12-14. (read)

What comfort it is to know that “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion”. What peace we have when we believe that “The sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...and if one of them has gone astray does he not ...go in search of the one that went astray...so that none of His sheep should perish (Phil.1:6; Jn.10:3; Matt.18:12; Jn.10:27f)?”

This picture is a picture of eternal security. But eternal security as we see here is not automatic! As we read on in Matt.18 we come to the means God uses to rescue His people.

Vv.15-20 tell us the means the Lord appointed to rescue His people and persevere them to the end. The means and method He ordained in order to uphold His promise of eternal security is redemptive relationships.

This view of relationship must transform how we respond to each other. We must love one another, give preference to one another, forgive one another, service one another, admonish one another, speak truth in love to one another, care for one another, pray for one another, consider one another, correct one another, console one another. This is a sketch of covenant community. This is what redemptive relationship looks like. This is the context in which God works His rescuing love for His people.

### Redemptive Relationship Weakeners

With that as a description of redemptive relationship and how God uses His people to rescue His people let's continue noticing our text for tonight. We see in this passage three conditions all starting with the word "if". These conditions introduce to us two weakeners and one strengthener of redemptive relationships. We will start with the weakeners.

#### If you faint

v.10

One thing which hinders redemptive relationships is seen in verse ten. "If you faint in the day of adversity your strength is small". The day of adversity is a broad heading. It can naturally be applied to the next verse and how we are to intervene in each other's life. When danger is upon one of our brothers or sisters; when Lady Folly's voice seems plausible to a believer, the church needs to activate the "search and rescue mission". This truly is a "day of adversity". The Proverb tells us that redemptive relationship will weaken (this covenant community will start breaking down) if when we think about entering into someone's life we "faint" (become cowardly) and withdraw from our responsibilities. Though at times redemptive relationship is a difficult ministry, God calls us to be our brother's keeper. When this seems overwhelming to us, we experience "fainting". We are abandoning our redemptive relationship responsibilities. The reason stated in v.10 for this can be remembered in one word: weakness

- What weakens Redemptive Relationships is weakness.

#### If you feign

v.12

The second relationship weakener might be remembered by the condition "If you feign". This is seen in v.12. If you say, "Behold, we did not know this". The pronoun "this" points back to the danger and the need for rescuing a brother or sister. Our sinful tendency to be a spectator rather than a participant in God's search and rescue mission can be viewed from this perspective. "I did not know there were problems. I assumed everything was Okay. I didn't see the marks of drifting and falling away. I was unaware of the evils".

When we say such things and yet have inkling that all is not well, we are supplying a weakener to God's redemptive plan. We are striving against the Lord of salvation. Deception,

dishonesty and duplicity are treachery to the body of Christ. As we participate in faking, we participate with Lady Folly. We make ourselves partners with the father of lies. Satan not the Savior is our comrade.

Why would any of us do such a thing? Why would we deliberately act as though we know nothing when all along we sensed there were problems? The proverb unpacks it for us. It locates the reason in wavering in unbelief over 1) what God does and 2) what God will do.

### What God does (present ministry)

#### perceives

You see this don't you in v.12. Through this question the point is clear. We act like we knew nothing because we disbelieve that God knows our motives. We do not think that He sees our hearts clearly. This verse says that our souls are the most public entity in the universe. We are naked before God...always!

#### protects

The second reason for feigning is that we disbelieve that God has been and is gracious to us. He has kept us from straying and leads us in ways of righteousness. Our hearts would wander if it were not for God's protection of us. By doubting this we find keeping watch over our brothers and sisters unappealing. This verse tells us that we are kept by God...always!

### What God will do (future ministry)

#### punishes

The third reason this Proverb gives us for weakening redemptive relationships through deception is that we disbelieve that God will do something about it. God will not be mocked. He repays man according to his work...always!

When relationships needing help are ignored and we pretend that we are unaware, we are double minded and abandoning our redemptive relationship responsibilities. The reason stated in v.12 for this can be remembered in one word: wavering

- What weakens Redemptive Relationships is wavering.

## Redemptive Relationship Strengtheners

## Vv.13-14

Up to this point we've heard that God's promise to rescue us from our wandering ways and to bring us safely to His eternal joys is found in a certain location (that is, a specific atmosphere or environment). This context we've said is redemptive relationship (i.e. a biblical local church). When we are empowered by God's grace to intervene by rescuing each other from danger we are experiencing the covenant community. We are enjoying redemptive relationships.

This is wonderful. But this can be weakened. These "redemptive relationship weakeners" (as we've named them) were introduced to us in the text through conditions starting with the word "if". "If you faint" (v.10) and "If you say" (v.12) set up for us that which undermines God's redemptive work in our midst. In other words, we will not get involved in each other's lives if we are weak or if we are dishonest.

## If you find

## V.14

Now we want to turn our attention to the third condition we see in this passage that sets up for us that which strengthens God's redemptive work in our midst.

Let me draw this message to a close by drawing your attention to vv.13-14. This redemptive relationship strengthener might be remembered by the condition "If you find" (read vv.).

In v.13, we come across who he specifically has been addressing. His son is the subject of these verses. His son was to find wisdom so as to not be weak when the day of adversity hits. His son was to find wisdom so as to not be disinterested and dishonest when someone needed help. To find wisdom gave him a future and a hope. We find here what strengthens redemptive relationships.

The reason stated in v.14 for this can be remembered in one word: wisdom

- What strengthens Redemptive Relationships is wisdom.

Now one could end, I suppose, the message tonight with this word. But I don't believe the message would be complete by doing so. What I found curious in these verses is how the father tries to persuade the son to find wisdom. He first says, "eat honey". Eat honey? Does that strike you as being odd? How does this strange command relate to what we've been talking about tonight? The clue to answering these questions is found in the first part of v.14. We are bound by Scripture and curiosity to figure out how v.14 relates to v.13. What does the command in verse 13 have to do with v.14?

The answer is that he connects the sweetness of physical pleasure (i.e. sweet honey to the tongue) to the sweetness of spiritual pleasure (i.e. sweet wisdom to the soul). Do you see this? Honey is sweet to your tongue. Wisdom is sweet to your soul (cf. Pr. 2:10; 3:17; 22:18). What he desired to do for his son was to assist him in not merely agreeing with this truth. He wanted him to sense the reality of it. The father desires the son to have a perception of and a passion for wisdom. He wants him not only to realize but relish the wonder of wisdom. By focusing upon and having fervor for wisdom, his son will be used to "rescue those who are being taken away to death".

In his book "When I Don't Desire God" Piper talking on how to fight for joy quotes Jonathan Edwards. Listen to this quote as he makes a distinction between opinion and sense.

*There is a difference between having a rational judgment[an opinion] that honey is sweet and having a sense of its sweetness...So there is a difference between believing that a person is beautiful and having a sense of [her] beauty. The former may be obtained by hearsay but the latter only by seeing the countenance...When the heart is sensible of the beauty and amiableness of a thing it necessarily feels pleasure in the apprehension. It is implied in a person's being heartily sensible of the loveliness of a thing that the idea of it is sweet and pleasant to the soul.<sup>1</sup>*

Now do not let me lose you at the end of this message. Stay with me lest this passage and message unravel and the truth does not set you free.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol.2, 14.

He is urging his son to be not a spectator but a participator in redemptive relationships; rescuing people from the danger of *Lady Folly*. The only way his son will have the strength and integrity to do this is to find wisdom as sweet to his soul. To realize and relish wisdom as sweet is to find the energy and drive and motivation necessary to reach out to those stumbling to the slaughter and help them back on to the way of life.

“What, then, is wisdom”? in the wrong question. “Who, then, is wisdom”? is the right one! When we go back to Proverbs 8-9, we see wisdom personified. *Lady Wisdom*, opposite of *Lady Folly*, is stunning. She is building her home and calling out to all to come in and delight in her loveliness. Who is this wisdom? 1Corinthians 1:30 says, God made [Christ Jesus] our wisdom. When we read this passage as well as all of Proverbs we must see what the father wanted the son to sense and experience. We began to hear what the Lord says to us. Oh, for ears and eyes (and even taste buds) at this point. We must sense Jesus Christ as the one and only true sweetness to our souls. He grants insight and knowledge and skill by which to make it successfully through this life. Yes; this is true. But oh, so much more does He give. He gives Himself to His people. As they perceive and pleasure in Jesus Christ strength and honesty well up in the soul. The soul then looks out and pities and cares for brothers and sisters who are duped into thinking that *Lady Folly* is sweet to the soul. Those sweetened by the Savior intervene. Those counting Christ as gain get involved. Those treasuring Christ more than life watch over their brothers and sisters! And when they need to intervene, they do. This type of people rescues people by relishing Christ and then representing Him as the Rescuer (cf. 2Cor.5:14ff). Jesus Christ is the sole redeemer and rescuer and restorer. People do not need people. They need Jesus Christ. And those who taste and see that Jesus is sovereign joy<sup>2</sup> in the Universe will not cower back from the search and rescue mission. Pleasure in Christ as honey to the tongue and you will risk relationships to save relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase “sovereign joy” comes from Augustine in *The Confessions*; p.214 (this page corresponds to my copy of the book). For an excellent article on how a superior pleasure in a supreme object (i.e. God in Christ) is needed to drive out inferior pleasures (i.e. sin) see John Piper’s work *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy; God’s triumphant grace in the lives of Augustine, Luther and Calvin* found in Clearcreek Chapel’s bookstore.

**Conclusion** This is the charge with which I leave you.

- Remove Redemptive Relationship Weakeners
  - Relish Christ
- Remember Redemptive Relationship Responsibilities
  - Rescue His people
  - Risk comfort
  - Represent Christ

Come and find wisdom (JESUS CHRIST) as sweet to your soul.

And then partner up with God and His people in rescuing, renewing and restoring God's people in the context of redemptive relationship!