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How to Build a Life

Skillful Living

Proverbs 24:1-34

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So let's imagine that we're driving through the country and we come across a brand new home—a beautiful home. I'm just wondering how many people in the room would immediately assume that apparently a tornado hit Home Depot and all the pieces necessary to make a home, all the building materials, just happen to all land in one spot and form this beautiful home. I'm going to doubt anyone in the room would immediately think that, and yet so often people think that way when it comes to life. Life just kind of happens. It's chance; it's fate; it's luck, but the reality is life doesn't just happen. Life is built over time through a long series of daily choices. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 24. Proverbs 24 offers what I think is a very helpful imagery or metaphor. It uses the imagery of building a home as a picture of what it takes to build a life. You see it in verses 3 and 4:

> **By wisdom a house is built,**
> **And by understanding it is established;**
> **And by knowledge the rooms are filled**
> **With all precious and pleasant riches.**

This is a metaphor for building a life. It's **built**. It's **established** which means *strengthened* and then the **rooms are filled** with life. So how does that happen? Well, he tells us it's a three-step process: **wisdom**, **understanding**, and **knowledge**. These are three Hebrew words we've seen over and over and over again through the book of Proverbs. They're critical terms.

The idea of **wisdom** is the ability to see with discernment, to see the right path, to figure it out, to believe it, to travel down that path. We've referred to this as *skillful living*. Maybe in the building world we would think of it as the blueprint. God has not left us alone to figure it out; He's presented us with a blueprint and so the first thing we have to do is figure it out. What is a home and what's the kind of home I want; what is it going to look like and what are the building materials? So it starts with the blueprint.

Understanding is a very practical Hebrew word that basically means *the how to*. So how do you take these great truths and flush them out in everyday ordinary life? You have a blueprint. How does the blueprint come to life? It's necessary to have very smart, very skilled people that show up on the site and bring the blueprint to life. It's a complicated process but there are ways to do it. There are codes. There's an order to it all, but these are the people that bring the blueprint to life.

Then **knowledge** is basically the accumulative effect of learnings. So we would refer to it as *experience*—this idea that I go out; I learn how to build this house, but over time. I learn from my mistakes; I learn better ways to do it; I learn how to become more efficient and I learn how to do this whole process better.

So that's the process in terms of building a house. It starts with the blueprint. It moves to those who execute that blueprint and turn it into a house, and then all the learnings and experience along the way just makes that crew better and better.

So how do you build a life? It starts with a blueprint. You have to figure out: What is the path of life and what does that look like, and what does it mean to travel that and understand the truth and the principles that create the blueprint? But then we move to kind of this complicated process of: how do I take these great truths and translate them into life? What does this look like at home...in the marketplace...in school...in a community? How do I bring these great truths to life in a very real and practical way? And then, what is the accumulative effect as I learn and I grow and I make my mistakes? The reality is that there is no reason we should keep making the same mistakes. Learn...grow...change...and that's how you begin to build a life and fill the rooms with all kinds of life and memories and moments that our souls long for.

So that's the imagery in verses 3 and 4 but you could take anything in the Bible and process it that way. I first have to understand the blueprint to understand the truth—what it is, what it means. Then I move to: what does this look like lived out at home or work or wherever, and then there's this constant learning and growing and changing to live life better. You could take everything that we've talked about in the book of Proverbs and you can see all of those proverbs as building materials and they all fall into this simple process. So just to illustrate that, I want to go through parts of chapter 24 and look at some of the building materials you can extrapolate to basically anything that's taught in the Scriptures. The first one is in verses 5 and 6:

> **A wise man is strong,**
> **And a man of knowledge increases power.**
> **For by wise guidance you will wage war,**
> **And in abundance of counselors there is victory.**

What verses 5 and 6 are saying is one of the critical foundation blocks to building a life is, "It must be done in community." God has made us that way. One of the terms that repeats itself again and again and again in the book of Proverbs is the Hebrew word *shalom*. We've talked a lot about it. It's often translated *peace* but it's much more than that. It's this whole idea of *flourishing*. If you think of all of the threads in a piece of fabric and all the ways those threads intersect, it's a really good understanding of shalom. Our lives intersect one another's lives in so many ways. We're in this together; we're going to flourish together or we're going to struggle together.

Now that's contrary to the culture in which we live. We live in a culture where we've become very individualized. We're very selfish; we're very self-centered. There's been a lot of discussion in the book of Proverbs around two terms. One is the term *rasa* which is a term that means *wicked*—not just people who go out and kill and rob banks. Wicked in Proverbs are those people who are selfish and self-centered. Maybe at the core of that are people who are willing to disadvantage the community in order to advantage themselves. It's a "me first" world. Now there are all kinds of ways that has manifested itself in our culture. We, in essence, decide that, "I'm my own little world; therefore I'm "*God*" of my own little world, and because I am *God* then I will decide truth for myself." We call it *relativism*. Relativism is nothing more than me saying, "I'm *God* so I'll decide what's true." We don't believe there are moral absolutes because we're *God*. "I'll decide what's right and wrong." We don't surrender to God as God but rather we decide, "Wait a minute! I'm *God*, so I will define *God* in my image. I will decide what I want for *God* and I will decide my own way to *God*." These are driving beliefs and philosophies in our culture and they're all symptomatic of the fact that we're individuals. As a result of that, we basically live our lives our own way. That is very contrary to what the proverb says, and frankly what the Bible says cover to cover.

So think of it this way: Imagine I decide I want to build a home. So I get a blueprint and I show up on the worksite. I don't know anything about building a home—never been to a job site but now I'm going to build my own home my way. What do you think is the chance I'm going to pull that off and build a home that is going to endure? I would say zero...zero! It's complicated. Now think of the difference: I show up on the worksite and there's a crew of people who have been doing this for a long time and they come alongside of me and they say, "Let me teach you; let me show you. Let me show you how to read the blueprint and bring it to life. Let me show you how you do that; let me show you the process; let me tell you about the codes; let me walk you through the process and over time you'll be really good at it and you'll be able to do it yourself." Think about how dramatically different that is. We live in a culture where everybody thinks, "I'm going to do it my way!" We're isolated as individuals and then we can't figure out how to live life skillfully.

So what the Proverb is saying is, "How do we gain strength—literally strength and then more strength?" The answer is, "We do it together; we do it in community. I have people around me that show me how to live skillfully and I gain confidence and I gain strength. I understand it better and I live life at a more skillful level. Notice verse 6:

For by wise guidance you will wage war,
And in abundance of counselors there is victory.

Again, that's going to the jobsite, finding a group of people that know how to do this, teaching me, mentoring me, showing me how to do it. Notice also in verse 6 that the writer uses the idea of going to **war**. I think he uses that imagery to remind us that we're in this together. Again, it's like the threads in a fabric that intersect in so many ways. If I'm going to decide we're going to war, it doesn't just affect my life; it affects all of us. Some of us will die, and if we lose this war, we're all in trouble. That isn't a decision that should be made in isolation. Let's talk about it; let's seek counsel; let's decide together if this is what we're going to do because it affects all of us.

The truth is as a husband, as a father, as a member of the community, I as a pastor, if I decide to be stupid, it doesn't just affect me. It affects a lot of other people. We're in this together! When I live skillfully, a lot of people benefit from that. When I decide to be stupid, a lot of people suffer the consequences of that. That's the idea of the proverb—there is a sense of community. What drives me every day is not making money, is not trying to find significance, is not self-self-self but it's rather, "Were in this together! How do we build a community together where we all flourish at home, at work, in the neighborhood, and in the community?" That's the whole idea. That's one of the core building blocks. I have to first see the blueprint and then I have to understand what this looks like in these different environments. And then over time I get better and better at it. Verse 7 is connected:

Wisdom is *too* exalted for a fool,
He does not open his mouth in the gate.

Exalted – the Hebrew word is high—it's literally the word for coral. Some think it has the idea that they would go into the Red Sea and look for this beautiful coral and there they would find these black pearls, but it was a tremendous amount of work. The fool says, "It's too much work," so they don't seek after **wisdom**; it's just too much work. So what happens is when they stand at the gate where there were significant conversations, where they talked about justice, their judicial system and where they talked about governing—about the most significant issues of their day—the fool

shows up to the gate, has nothing to say, and shows he is a fool. He just keeps his mouth shut—has nothing to contribute to the conversation.

Now I've mentioned this before but I think it's an interesting perspective into our culture to just listen when really hard things happen in our culture. Listen to the answers people give and you quickly get a sense of who has wisdom and who are the fools. None of these very complicated issues in our culture can be reduced down to a bumper sticker slogan. Those are the words of a fool. They are complicated but the fool doesn't know this because wisdom is just too hard to pursue. So when they show up at the gate, they have nothing to contribute. Notice verse 10:

If you are slack in the day of distress,
The **day of distress**, the day of calamity when the storm rages. Is the house going to stand? Well that depends. It depends upon how it's built. In the day of the storm **if you are slack...** It's a great Hebrew word means limp. I think we would say wimpy. If your house is wimpy in the day of the storm it's going to blow over.
Your strength is limited. Your strength is blocked.

Now we already learned where we gain **strength**—together, in community. That's what verses 5 and 6 said. That's where we gain strength and more strength. There are houses when the storm comes that will collapse. There are other houses that will endure. Jesus said the exact same thing in the Sermon on the Mount: "There are houses built on the sand; there are houses built on the rock." Jesus said, "What's the difference? Those who listen and obey." Build on the rock. You get the blueprint. You try to figure out how it comes to life in ordinary life and we learn and grow and get better at it.

So again, think about this idea of isolated or individualistic. Imagine you take a two-by-four; lay it flat and then put one more two–by-four on it perpendicular. So the beginning: one board of a studded wall and that's all you have. "How strong is that one board?" Answer: "It's not strong at all." Any child in the room can come up and push it over. But when all of those boards are studded out and the walls are put together and everything is connected, it's unbelievably strong. This is the whole idea of community versus the individual. We show every sign in our culture of being a very individualistic culture. One of the ways it shows up is we're limp; we're wimpy. We can't take anything. It takes nothing to knock the wind out of people. People are offended by everything. People are overwhelmed by everything. The storm comes up and people crash and burn. They can't take it; they turn to all kinds of destructive things. We talked about that last week.

That's what the text is saying: *The fools have no strength because we find strength together.* So that's the first building block you might say of chapter 24. We have to learn that and then we have to figure out what does this look like in my life, and over time we get better and better at it. The next is mostly in verse 11:

Deliver those who are being taken away to death,
And those who are staggering to slaughter, Oh hold *them* back.

This is the idea there's some sort of injustice happening and these people are unfairly being led to the **slaughter** and the appeal of the proverb is to do something, "Step up and stop it!" The idea would be if you're going to be a person of wisdom, if you're going to live skillfully, you have to have the courage to do the right thing even when it's unpopular, even when there are serious negative consequences as a result. Research shows that in America ten percent of our population

will do *bad* no matter what. Ten percent will do *good* no matter what. But there's an eighty percent that, faced with these moments, will seriously weigh the consequences of doing good, and if the consequences are too negative, they will not choose to do the right thing.

The sexual harassment *Me Too movement* is the classic example. You have all kinds of bad things going on and you have a whole bunch of people—hundreds, probably thousands of people—that knew it was going on. Of course they did! But they weighed the option, "If I do the right thing, I won't be in the movie." "I'll get blackballed." "I'll suffer the consequences." "I'll get fired from my job." "I won't get the promotion." There were people that weighed the options and decided, "Even though I know this is going on and I know that it's wrong, I choose not to say anything." Then what comes is when it's exposed, people make all kinds of excuses. "Oh I didn't know...I didn't know," which is exactly what the proverb says. Verse 12:

If you say, "See, we did not know this,"
Does He not consider *it* who weighs the hearts?
And does He not know *it* who keeps your soul?
And will He not render to man according to his work?

The proverb is saying that, "Because I didn't know that; I didn't know they were being led to destruction or I'd have done something," to which the proverb is saying, "You did know...you did know...yes you did! You weighed the options and realized by doing the right thing there would be consequences you were unwilling to face, so you remain silent." If you're going to build a life of character and integrity, if you're actually going to build a culture where people can flourish, you have to have the courage to do the right thing regardless of the consequences that come your way. The next one is verses 13:

My son, eat honey, for it is good,
Yes, the honey from the comb is sweet to your taste;

So in the ancient world **honey** would have been a delicacy. David uses the same language in Psalm 19: "The Scriptures are as sweet as honey and more valuable than gold." It's this idea of something people craved and longed forward and desired. For me it would probably be ice cream, but it carries this idea of something I really like, something I pursue, something I enjoy. Verse 14:

Know *that* wisdom is thus (the ice cream) **for your soul;**
If you find *it*, then there will be a future,
And your hope will not be cut off.

It's this idea that if you're serious about this, if you really want to gain wisdom and then you want to live it out and you want to get better at it, you have to want it and you have to want it bad. There's no magic to this. There isn't some osmosis where it just sinks into your skin. You have to want it, pursue it, desire it, and go after it. This is a complicated world. It's a messed-up world and it takes a lot of energy and a lot of effort to get to the blueprint and figure some things out if you're going to build a life. So think of it this way: If you come to church a couple of times a month and literally do not open this Book any other time, you don't want it. You're not hungry for **wisdom**—you're not too interested in wisdom. You're not serious about it. You're not real serious about building a life that matters. You can't be because there's no way it works that way!

Last week between services a young man asked me a great question. “I want to learn to be more intimate with God but can you help me understand what that means?” That’s a great question! For those of us that are married, think of it this way: How much work does it take to make a marriage work? I would say, “A lot...a lot!” We don't just climb onto a white horse and ride into the sunset. It doesn't work that way. There’s no magic; it’s not a fairy tale. We are people and people are complicated, and it takes a lot of work to make a marriage thrive. A marriage is simple compared to an intimate relationship with God. That’s the whole point of Genesis 2. God made a laboratory with someone like you in order to better understand an intimate relationship with someone who's not like you at all. So if you think about how much work is necessary to make your marriage thrive, how much work must be necessary to experience an intimate relationship with God? Most Christians I think, if they're to be honest, would say that their Christian life is disappointing to them. But then you have to stop and ask yourself, “How much effort are you putting into it? How hungry are you for wisdom, for truth? Do you long for it?” The writer of the proverb says you have to want it like you want the honey. It has to be this longing, this thing that you're serious about, and you search for it and it's sweet and delightful and you just want more and more. If you're going to build a life, you have to want it and get to be serious about it. The next ones in verse 15 and 16:

Do not lie in wait, O wicked man, against the dwelling of the righteous;
Do not destroy his resting place;

So, I’ve mentioned this before—the tension between the *Rasa* and the *Tzedek*—between the **wicked** and the **righteous**. Again, the wicked are not bank robbers but simply those who disadvantage others to advantage themselves, and the righteous are those that are more passionate about the community than themselves. So there's this tension between the two.

For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again,
But the wicked stumble in *time of* calamity.

Verses 15 and 16 are a warning to the wicked. The building block is to understand that, at the end of the story, which team wins. This is not unknown; this is not up for grabs. We don't wonder about this. This is one of the most consistent themes in the book of Proverbs. God’s team wins! There is a path that leads to life; there’s a path that leads to destruction. Jesus said the same thing, “There's a narrow path that leads to life,” meaning not as many people will take it. “There's a wide path that leads to death,” but at the end of the story, there's no guesswork. God wins! The wicked lose!

If you are to drive through the countryside after a storm and you see house after house after house that have collapsed and every once in a while you see a house that stands strong and true, unaffected by the storm, wouldn't you be interested in who built the one that collapsed and who built the one that stands the storm? The idea of this proverb is knowing how the story ends, which should be highly motivating to which path I travel. There's a warning to the wicked in verse 16; there's a reminder that the **righteous**, the *Tzadek*, **may fall seven times.** Hey, life is hard. You get beat up; you get knocked off your feet; you get the wind knocked out of you, but what's distinctive about the righteous is we get back on our feet, not because of our own power but because of the power of Christ in me. I know how the story ends. The New Testament promises because I am “in Christ”, He will finish what He started. He will get me to the finish line and the end of the story will be absolutely spectacular! No matter what this culture throws at me, no matter how many times it knocks me down, I tell you this: I will get up...and I will get up...and I will get up! You will not defeat me because I stand in the righteousness of Christ, and I am absolutely sure I will be there at the finish line and it will be spectacular! That dramatically affects my worldview. It affects how I live; it affects what I live for. Nobody beats the system. The wicked aren't going to somehow work

their way around it. The wicked lose; the righteous win, and that should dramatically affect my perspective. Look at verse 19:

Do not fret because of evildoers
Or be envious of the wicked;
For there will be no future for the evil man;
The lamp of the wicked will be put out. (literally snuffed out.)

So if I really understand that's the blueprint, then how does that affect my day-to-day life and how do I get better and better and better at that? There is also an interesting proverb related to that in verses 17 and 18:

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls,
And do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles;
Or the LORD will see *it* and be displeased,

This is a really important part of this perspective. I don't want to see the wicked destroyed. I don't want to see them **stumble** and **fall**. I don't rejoice when their messes are exposed. These are people that God loves. These are people that Jesus died for. These are people that God offers salvation to if they would freely receive it. I don't want to see them destroyed. I want to see them change paths; I want to see them find the path of life.

In the world of politics it's just about winning, and people find great satisfaction when all kinds of messes are exposed about people on the other team. You can't tell me that Washington, D.C. is filled with people that want to see our country flourish. They are people who want to win and they take great delight when the other side is destroyed and crushed. It's easy as Christians to fall into that, to get in that mindset, and you really need to change your perspective and realize, "Hey, I'm not rooting for the wicked to get snuffed out. That's not what I want. I just want them to change paths. I want them to find the life that Jesus has given me. I want them to figure out a better way to live." If I can model that, if I can love them, if I can influence them down a different path, that's my heart! I want them to know what has so changed my life. I don't want to take delight in their demise. The proverb says that attitude **displeases** God. The last one I want to look at is in verses 21 and 22:

My son, fear the LORD and the king;
Do not associate with those who are given to change,
Change meaning those who are agitators; they are always stirring things up.
For their calamity will rise suddenly,
And who knows the ruin *that comes* from both of them?

Verses 21 and 22 are saying if you want to build a life and fill the rooms with life and happiness and good, you have to learn to surrender to authority—God and His king. If you're going to make it in this world, if you don't want to be miserable all the time, you have to learn to color within the lines. That's how it works. In a sin-cursed world, authority is necessary. There's no community that could flourish apart from authority structures that are necessary.

There are a lot of people in our world who would say they're the victim. "Life is unfair; life is unjust. Everybody always picks on me." And yet if you dig into their story, you find out, "No, what's actually happening is you've never learned to surrender to those in authority. You're an

agitator and you pick a fight at every turn and it's your fault that it's miserable. Sometimes I hear people say, “Well, I only answer to God,” to which I would say, “Wrong, wrong, wrong. The Bible couldn't be clearer that there are people in authority on earth that represent God on earth. I guarantee you, if you're a person that struggles with authority, you're a person that struggles with God's authority. If you are humble and broken and submissive before God, that's going to be reflected in how you respond to the authority structures around you.” You have to figure out, “What does that mean? What does it look likes at home, in all these environments, and how do I get better at that?”

So these are all just building blocks. You can go through the entire book of Proverbs and do it this way: I first have to understand it and then I have to figure out, “How do I put it into practice,” and then over time, “How do I get better and better at it?”

Again, imagine we're taking a little drive and you see house after house after house collapsed, falling down, burned up—one after another—but every once in a while you see a house that is true and straight and endures the storms. Wouldn't you eventually want to know what makes the difference and wouldn't that highly influence your decision as to who you want to build your house? That's what the proverb is saying. Pick your path and then, “This is the process to build a life: by **wisdom** a house is built, by **understanding** it is established, and by **knowledge** its rooms are filled with life!”

Our Father, we are so thankful that we have not been left alone to guess and to grope in the darkness to figure this thing out. God, You've given us a blueprint, that if we will pursue it, if we will believe it, if we will live it, we might experience life. Lord, may that be so. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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