In his recent book, *Don't Follow Your Heart*, Thaddeus Williams, professor at Biola, argues that just as the Bible gives us 10 Commandments for how to worship God and love our neighbour, so our current culture has it's own 10 commandments for how to worship yourself and love yourself. And if you want to live life well, you need to follow these rules. And they are, 1. Live your best life - glorify yourself; 2. Ok boomer - never be outdated; 3. Follow your heart - obey your emotions at all costs; 4. Be true to yourself - defy everyone else's expectations; 5. You do you - live your own truth and let others live theirs; 6. YOLO - pursue boundary free experiences; 7. The answers are within - trust yourself; 8. Be authentic - invent and advertise your own identity; 9. Live the dream - force the universe to bend to you; and 10. Love is love - all lifestyles are equally valid.

Now whatever you think of those, they raise a question, don't they? How *are* you supposed to live a rich, fulfilling life, in which you thrive? *And* what would the opposite of that - a living death - look like?

Well, Proverbs was written to help you answer just that. But, it won't surprise you, the answers it gives are very different from the 10 Commandments of Self-Worship.

So, that's what we're going to look at this morning: life and death: 1. Living Life; 2. Living Death; 3. So Choose Life

Living Life

Now, maybe you've heard of Bryan Johnson, the Californian tech entrepreneur who spends 2 million dollars a year, and most of his day, attempting to reverse the ageing process and live for ever. And his goal, he says, is to get his 46 year old organs to look and act like he's 18. And in a recent Time magazine article, he described his Blueprint protocol that includes, amongst lots of exercise and diet stuff, swallowing 111 pills a day and wearing a baseball cap that fires red light into his scalp, while not, he said, giving into the desire to eat ice cream, or have sex at 1 a.m., or drink beer with friends.

But ageing experts are not so convinced. In the same article a Dr. Cohen, Dean of Gerontology (or Geriatrics as we used to call it!), at USC, said, "Death is not optional; it's written into our genes." In other words, however many pills he swallows, he will die. While a Dr. Verdin, CEO of Buck Institute for Research on Aging, said, "If you want immortality, you should go to church".

And Proverbs would say, "Well…yes… and no". Because, it says, *there is* a way to live that prolongs your life. Proverbs 3:1-2, 'My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, *for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you*.' Or, 4:10: 'Hear, my son, and accept my words, *that the years of your life may be many*.' Or Proverbs 9: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me [Wisdom] your days *will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life*.'

But is that true? Or is Proverbs trying to sell you something as dodgy as Bryan Johnson's 111 pills a day? Because you probably know someone who was good and wise, but who died way too young. Where was Proverbs for them?

But Proverbs is not about cast-iron promises but general principles… that things will go better for you, including living longer, if you live within the grain of God's creation. I mean, think about who Solomon, king of Israel, is addressing here. His sons - who'll grow up to be kings and princes. So

they're likely to face multiple threats, maybe even assassination attempts from rebels or disgruntled advisors. So ruling wisely and justly, with grace and skill, might very well have lengthened their lives!

And yet, that Dean of Gerontology is right, death is not optional. Even the wisest will die. I recently flew to the UK to take the funeral of a dear uncle. And to watch my mother weeping over her brother's coffin was heartbreaking. She told me afterwards it was impossible in that moment not to think of her own mortality, her own end.

And yet, Proverbs is clear, life is more than multiplied years. Look again at 3:1-2, 'Let your heart keep my commandments, for lengths of days and years of life *and peace* they will add to you.' So this isn't just about extending your life, so you can grow more and more angry or embittered by the world. It's saying, there's a way to live that adds peace, *shalom*, the all-round well being of God to your life, even as it adds years.

But think: what do you need to feel *peaceful* about a situation, or life in general? You need a confidence about how things are going to work out, don't you? Or, if not work out, that you're going to be ok. So look at Proverbs 1:33, 'Whoever *listens* to me [to wisdom] *will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster*.'

Now our current culture says, 'no, if you want to thrive, listen to *yourself*, to your emotions, and let them guide you'. But let me ask you: how steady are your emotions? Have you ever noticed them wobbling? Like not just over your lifetime, but within the space of an hour? For example, have you ever felt really confident about life, and you're ok, and you could tackle anything, but the next moment felt utterly useless and loathed yourself? Or have you ever passed a mirror, and thought, 'looking sharp' but ten minutes later thought, 'you are so ugly'?

And you're supposed to look inside *yourself* for health and peace?! No, Proverbs says, look outside yourself to the One who is infinitely consistent, who never changes, and you'll know a deep sense of security and, with it, peace.

But maybe talk of feelings is emotional guff to you. For you, the way to thrive at life is to shoot for the stars, pursue your dream, and get what you want. But will it give you what you want? Firstly, the odds are you won't get it - like the thousands of athletes, actors, and artists who don't. But secondly, look at those who do make it. Are they really happier for having made it? And could that be because *it* - whatever *it* is - is never enough. It never satisfies.

But Proverbs tells you what can: Proverbs 19:23, '*the fear of the Lord* leads to life, *and whoever has it rests satisfied*.'

In other words, when you know God is infinitely greater than you, or your dreams, and yet loves you; and in response, instead of worshipping yourself, you love and worship him with awe, *that* has the power to satisfy your heart beyond anything any dream can offer.

And that won't just do something good to you on the inside. Look at Proverbs 3:21-22, 'My son, do not lose sight of these - keep sound wisdom and discretion, and they will be life for your soul *and adornment for your neck*.' Now, have you ever met someone who seems to have a glow about them? They would never be considered one of the beautiful people, but there is a beauty about them that

shines? And Proverbs says, ‘Sure, fearing and loving God more than anything else will beautify a life like a necklace does a neck.’

And when you see it it’s deeply attractive. In fact, it’s captivating: Proverbs 11:30, ‘The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, *and whoever captures souls is wise*.’ But just for a moment imagine the opposite of that - a tree of death. A tree that’s alive but around it nothing else grows - because of the shade it casts, or the acidic sap it drops. And ask yourself, could a life be like that? That to have this person as a friend or colleague or partner, is anything but healthy, because they’re consumed with self. And no one else thrives in their shade. And Proverbs is saying, you don’t need to be like that. Instead, as people come into your orbit - at work, at home, in your friendship group, or here at church, you can be like a tree of life to them. That it’s not just you who are thriving, you help them thrive too.

And such a life isn’t just beautiful to us. Proverbs 8:35, ‘Whoever finds me [Wisdom] finds life *and obtains favour from the Lord*.’ And that word *favour* is the same word used elsewhere for God accepting a sacrifice, or approving of a priest. Which means, while your heart will one moment tell you ‘you’re amazing' and the next 'you’re the most useless person who's ever lived’, there’s a way to live where you can know God’s never changing loving favour and acceptance.

And it’s this way of wisdom.

Take it, and it can be profoundly healing. You see, do you carry any scars from the way people have treated you or rejected you? Well, our current culture says, look inside yourself for your inner confidence. But what good is that when it’s been crushed? When you can’t heal yourself? So, look at 3:7-8, ‘be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. *It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones*.’ And the word for *flesh* there is the word for the umbilical cord, which is enough to get a former neonatologist exited. It’s used for your navel, or belly button. And so Proverbs is says, the healing of your hurts doesn’t come by navel gazing, by looking down and in, but up and out, to someone far more loving and stable than your heart will ever be.

And Proverbs 4:22 says that the words of wisdom ‘*are life* to those who find them, *and healing to all their flesh*.’ On Monday some of us were at Clara’s PhD defence, and she told us how certain bacteria produce substances specifically targeting other bacteria. And you’ll have heard how modern medicines are increasingly, specifically targeted against this cell, or that receptor. But as you begin to live life wisely, fearing and loving God above everything else, it doesn’t just do good to one part of you, but the whole of your life, bringing healing to your mind and body, heart and emotions, because it starts putting things right.

So, learn to live wisely and you’ll know a deep inner peace, security, and satisfaction. You’ll be a blessing to others, even as you enjoy God’s blessing in your own life. And it will be healing to you.

But there is an alternative.

Living Death

And as well as talking of how long we might live, Proverbs also speaks of how life might end: 21:16, ‘One who wanders from the way of good sense will rest *in the assembly of the dead*.’ Throw off the suffocating constraints of previous generations, get off their path and you’ll really start to live, you’re told, but Proverbs says the reality is much darker.

And it uses two place names for death: Sheol - the place of the dead, and Abaddon - the place of eternal ruin. The problem is, they both have insatiable appetites: 27:20, ‘Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied.’ Like monsters in a horror movie, they devour as many victims as life throws at them.

The problem is, people aren’t thrown into their mouths as unwilling victims, rather Proverbs teaches us that people choose to take the path that leads straight to them. Lady Wisdom invites us all to come feast with her, but we can think ‘all this stuff about fearing God, and worshipping him instead of myself is oppressive’, and go eat at Madam Folly’s fast food joint instead. But the one who makes that choice, 9:18, ‘Does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.'

So, follow the Ten Commandments of Self-Worship, live a life of consumption - consuming experiences, adventures, wealth, sex, or others, and at the end discover it’s you who’s been consumed.

You see, death is not just a monster waiting for you at the end of life, it’s something whose shadow stretches into this life. And the very things you’re told will bring life, may just bring death.

Proverbs 1:32, ‘For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them.’ Turn away from God, be complacent and think, ‘hey you can live however you want to live, love is love, you do you, break with the moral norms, be the authentic you’ and it might not be life you experience, but the shadow of death. And let’s face it, all the statistics on the mental health of young people agree: Break with the wisdom of God’s word, break with the reality of your body, live against the grain of creation, and reality will have this habit of breaking you. Proverbs 29:1, ‘He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.’

And that’s not just a problem for Gen Z-ers, caught up in our current cultural moment. It’s true for any of us who see any infringement of our freedom as a personal affront. As Proverbs 15:10, ‘There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way; whoever hates reproof will die.’

But that dying can begin even while we live, Proverbs 14:30, ‘A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.’ I mean, have you ever experienced that inner unhappiness, that anger or frustration at yourself or others because they’re enjoying what you want but don’t have? Let that grow, Proverbs says, and it becomes like a cancer eating away at you. But learn to be content with your life, or your body, and it’ll do the opposite.

But of course, a self-focused life of self-worship, doesn’t just rob *you* of life. It robs those around you. Proverbs 10:21, ‘The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.’ In other words, the righteous person, the person learning to feed themselves on God's wisdom, discovers they have more and more to share with others. While the person who thinks they’re already wise, and ‘this Book, or that correction, has nothing to teach me’, ends up starving himself - he doesn’t even have enough to feed himself, let alone others.

In 1943, CS Lewis wrote a little book called, *The Abolition of Man.* And it was/is incredibly insightful, because Lewis foresaw that if you abandon universal moral absolutes, and fail to teach them to kids, the result will be moral decay. That a failure to educate the heart, that there are things

we should love more seriously than ourselves, will end up with men behaving like animals. Or, as Lewis puts it, 'Men without Chests.'

He could have got that from Proverbs 10:21 because when it says, 'fools die *for lack of sense*' what it actually says is, fools die *for lack of heart*. From having empty chests, from not loving the right things, or loving them but in the wrong order. Because get what you love and worship wrong and it'll be the death of you.

But it'll also be death to the child, or family, or romantic partner you love more than God. Because you're using them to fill a hole only God can fill. And no one can bear that weight.

So… if it's a choice between life and death - how can we make the right one?

Choose Life
And Proverbs gives us four things we can do to put us on the path to life.

1. Guard your heart

Proverbs 4:23, 'Keep your heart with all vigilance *for from it flow the springs of life*.' In others words, as much as you care about anything, like football, or your grades, or the results of that experiment, care about the state of your heart more - because lives, your life and those you love, depend on it. Know your weaknesses. And know how temptation and sin exploit those weakness and then take guarding and avoiding action. Even if it's costly.

2. Leave and cleave.

Which I know refers to marriage but look at Proverbs 9:6, '*Leave* your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight.' Live a repentant lifestyle and don't be complacent. Don't excuse your sin. Instead, when you're conscious of being tempted, imagine yourself standing at a crossroads - and this sin you're tempted by is signposted 'Death'. But asking God for his help to resist is signposted 'life'. And choose life.

Leave folly and instead, cleave to wisdom. Proverbs 3:18, Wisdom 'is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; *those who hold her fast* are called blessed.' Now, has a tree ever ridden the elevator to your floor, knocked on your door, and asked for a hug? No! If you want to hug a tree you have to go to it. And Proverbs says the same is true for wisdom - you have to lay hold of her. You have to put in the effort and make steps to grow, and if you do, it will be a tree of life to you. So think about reading a chapter of Proverbs a day, and then take one verse that struck you and meditate on it for 5 minutes, asking God's Spirit to teach you from it.

But, of course, the reality is that however much Proverbs tells us about life and death, it's only when Jesus came that we got to see the Life it's talking about lived out. And it's only in him that we get to see how death's long shadow is broken. As Paul puts it, God's grace, his favour on our lives, that Proverbs talks of, 'has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Tim 1:10).

You see, Proverbs 15:24 says, 'the path of life leads upward for the prudent [for the person who lays hold of wisdom], that he may turn away from Sheol beneath.' But Jesus comes and he doesn't say 'I'll show you how to find that path.' He says, I am that path: I am the way and the truth and the life. To lay hold of me is to lay hold of wisdom. To know me is to know life.

So, as you read and meditate on Proverbs, ask the Spirit not just to teach you, but to show you how this points you to Jesus, and then lay hold of him by faith.

3. Embrace discipline:
Proverbs 6:23, 'For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, *and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life*.' When my brother and I were boys, and we were naughty, my mother would physically bang our heads together. Parents, please don't do that! But whether it's a parent applying the board of discipline to the seat of learning, or a friend saying, 'I really don't think you should be doing that', or the police stopping and fining you, discipline is rarely comfortable, But the person who's growing in skill at life realises, it's a gate being opened onto the way of life.

So, embrace it. Examine what you can learn from it, even if it's unjustified. And you can do that because you know you are already loved and accepted, because the Author of life himself went through the ultimate discipline of death for you. He loves you. So if he's allowing discipline in your life his motive must be love.

The American singer, Alisa Childers writes, 'Jesus never said to follow our hearts, chase our dreams, and find ourselves. He said we must deny ourselves, pick up our crosses, and follow him. This is where true freedom, hope, and deep joy abide.' So take up the cross of discipline, and live, because he took up the far heavier cross for you.

But 4. and finally, Pursue the fear of God
Proverbs 14:27 says, 'The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death.' Now, you could try really hard to love God so much you fear to grieve him. But you probably won't make much progress. Instead, consider starting each day by asking God to fill you with his Spirit, and fan into flame your love for him, and to change what you love most. Because if the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, Jesus came and said, 'I'm that fountain': John 4: "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again… [it] will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (v14). And "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'". (John 7:38). And he's talking about the Spirit.

So, as well as praying each morning: 'Lord Jesus, fill me with your Spirit today,' ask him that streams of life might flow out from you to those you meet. That you'd become a tree of life.

Proverbs 19:23 says, 'The fear of the Lord leads to life, *and whoever has it rests satisfied*.' And Psalm 17:15 says 'As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.'

And who is God's likeness, except Jesus? The radiance of his glory and the exact imprint of his nature. You see, a life of self-worship will never leave you satisfied or give you rest. Because no amount of living your best life now, or yolo-ing, or you-do-you, or following your heart, will ever satisfy. But pray for God to show you Jesus from his word. Ask him to fill you with his Spirit and fan into flame your love and fear of him; and gaze upon Christ with the eyes of faith, and your heart will be satisfied.