

# Ageless Wisdom

**Proverbs 1:1 – Proverbs 4:15**

By Jeremy Lucas

## ORDERLY WISDOM (Introduction to Proverbs)

So many of us have been humbled by the Wisdom of Solomon to condense a thought and capture a truth in just a few words when we might have overdone it with many. How sweet it must have been to have excelled in knowledge and wisdom, yet found reserve in the simplicity of explanation. Through our overcomplicated and sometimes destructive nature, we often jump at the opportunity to answer confusion or correct someone's error while displaying our own insecurities of ignorance. *Ageless Wisdom* is being written that we might return to the practical application of a life that thirsts and drinks of knowledge. Lest we appear as a piano with nothing to play, this study is meant to restore and kindle our passion for the proper handling of God's Word.

Most of us have a tendency to use the One-Liner approach with the *Book of Proverbs*. We find that it is so filled with insight that each line is distinct enough to stand alone from the rest. On many levels this is true and we do well to utilize Solomon in our attempts at provoking thought from our listeners. However, the entire book is designed with an order and a structure that is not merely a cluster of random convictions.

*"And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea he gave good heed, and sought out, [and] set in order many proverbs."* **Ecclesiastes 12:9**

Just as we learn the importance of understanding Biblical context through the practice of right division (II Timothy 2:15), so should we also bear in mind that Solomon is writing from a particular vantage point. Each phrase will receive its due attention and we will not shy from powerful sayings as they arise, but there is a larger purpose behind all such statements when held together by the inspiration and organization of God.

You are encouraged to observe the 31 chapter divisions that set a convenient possibility for going through the book (chapter by chapter) approximately once a month. Although this verse-by-verse structure was not established until 15<sup>th</sup> Century England, it is most helpful in our modern workday when it seems almost impossible to take even a few minutes with the Word of God. You will not find that this study is preset with a commonly accepted outline, for if any such pattern was set in stone, it is inevitable that one of you might find different ideas elsewhere and bring into question the unimportant. It is therefore the responsibility of the reader to keep these studies accountable to a higher order that shall be discovered from verse to verse and proverb to proverb. My accountability will be better held in check among those who read ahead in anticipation, for it is they who hunger after the proper handling of truth.

Before we begin this process, it is essential to remember that these proverbs are, in and of themselves a form of scholarly and intellectual poetry. Rather than being driven by emotion and experience (as much of poetry is prepared), they are designed to stir the mind as a challenge to the heart's intent. A single proverb standing alone can sometimes be like an instrument without its song or a song without its instrument. Thus, each passage from the *Book of Proverbs* ought to be pondered, considered, examined, and enjoyed for its order and its beauty by the handiwork of our Almighty God.

## THE INTIMIDATION OF WISDOM

(Proverbs 1:1-2)

*"The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding." Proverbs 1:1-2*

Perhaps you can recall a time when you opened your mailbox and touched your finger to an envelope whose return address was of great importance. A few days after being cited for speeding, a letter from the Department of Motor Vehicles can be very daunting as we run through our minds all the reasons that they might make contact. Occasionally, we receive a letter that makes our heart race and we debate how quickly we should open it.

The Book of Proverbs opens with a similar intimidation. Solomon's reputation precedes him in this text as we open to verse one and ask, "Am I even in the same league as this son of David, this king of Israel to read of his wisdom and understand what he's writing?" And truth be told, he really does lay down the gauntlet of choice for his readers. The first seven verses set forth a most provocative ultimatum which forces his audience to realize that if they want wisdom, then they must read on. His alternative implication is that by not reading on, they will not be wise. A preview of these verses can be imagined this way:

*If you want to know wisdom, read on.  
If you want to understand what you know, read on.  
If you want to be just, read on.  
If you want to have good judgment, read on.  
If you want to live with your head held high, read on.*

Of course, the flip side of this is what Solomon does not say.

*If you want to be a fool, stop reading.  
If you want to be ignorant, stop reading.  
If you want to be unjust, stop reading.  
If you want to be a poor judge of information, stop reading.  
If you want to live with your head hanging low, stop reading.*

Troubling as it is convicting, this is no game to Solomon. He does not treat wisdom as an option and neither does he intend for his readers to take it lightly. The opening verse displays the grandeur of his authorship by the pen of a king. And without hesitation, he moves immediately into verse two with a couple of hard-hitting questions that come in unique form.

"To know wisdom and instruction" is the most deeply penetrating question of every reader. Do you or do you not want to be instructed in knowledge? Or have you already been instructed to the final limit? If you are willing to be given direction and guidance in this rather complicated concept, then again, he insists that you read on.

"To perceive the words of understanding" is a matter of knowing one's nature. It's common to jump on the bandwagon of phrases like, "I understand" or "I get it" because we wouldn't want someone to think that we are deficient in some area, but Solomon is asking his readers to consider just what it is to understand. If you want to know what it means to really know, he insists that you read on.

Standing alone, these verses can often seem rather insignificant because they don't appear to be drawing any conclusions within themselves. However, as we'll see in the next few verses, the poetry of Solomon's ultimatum will result in a much more divine purpose than just his challenge alone. Therefore, my friends, read on.

## GRILLED CHEESE EDUCATION

(Proverbs 1:3)

*"To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity;" Proverbs 1:3*

A professor recently shared with his students the theory of what he called a "Grilled Cheese Education." After teaching for many years, he noted that in the past few semesters, college kids can be likened to a man who goes into a fine restaurant, orders Hibachi Steak, but gladly accepts a grilled cheese sandwich when the food is brought out. Upon receipt of the bill, the man pays in full for the steak that he did not receive or enjoy.

Knowing the meaning behind the professor's words, one student spoke up and said, "We just want the degree so we can get a good job." And as the instructor let his head fall into his hands, the horrible modern view was evident: Few people want to receive instruction, but they all want to reap the benefits and rewards that follow.

We want wisdom, but we don't want to be instructed in it. We want to be just, but we don't want anyone to tell us if we're being unjust. We want to claim that we have good judgment, but we fail to know what it is. We want to stand tall, but we continue looking at the ground. To receive instruction on anything is the only way that a man can actually profit in his end reward.

The "instruction of wisdom" is, as we already know, the capstone of this entire book. For we will discover that all of life is wrapped up in a choice between folly and ignorance or wisdom and grace. Thus, if we are willing to receive instruction unto wisdom, then read on.

The instruction of "justice and judgment" can seem rather obscure depending on how we look at it. Given a different word, we might have a more familiar connection.

*"All Scripture [is] given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:" II Timothy 3:16*

Solomon's notion of justice and judgment is found in his teaching on righteousness. What is it to be right? How can a man know if what he has said, what he has done, or what he has thought is right? Such instruction comes from the Word of God. If we are to know what it is to be right, to be just, and to exercise good judgment, read on.

The instruction of "equity" rests on a much more personal application. This is not, as many of us would assume, a matter of good financial planning. Quite the contrary, the instruction of equity is about teaching an insecure man to be confident. Insecurities come in the absence of sure knowledge and as a result, many find themselves ashamed by what they do not know. Solomon affirms that if a man wants to stand tall, he should read on.

If we are to share in that stand, then it is our responsibility to be instructed on the wisdom, justice, judgment, and equity that lay the necessary footing. Now is the time to recognize our need for instruction, to anticipate the process, and to accept more than a Grilled Cheese Education.

## AGE OF INNOCENCE

(Proverbs 1:4)

*"To give subtlety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion."* **Proverbs 1:4**

As the white clouds roll in from behind a storm, I sometimes look westward in the direction of a state where many memories still bring a smile. Driving north on a Florida highway usually means that there is a known destination in mind and those clouds merely pass above my hurried journey. But looking out toward Oklahoma, I recall a time when there was no destination. Along with a friend or two, you might have once found me setting up lemonade stands just north of Tulsa and wandering down to the creek (or "crick" as it's called in the south) to pick up crawdads. With no real knowledge of anything, I was naïve to everything. As they say, "ignorance is bliss."

The reason I sometimes reflect on those earlier days is not because I choose to return to a former state of mind, but instead, because I remember what it was like for life to be so simple. An innocent mind will not, however, remain in that condition forever. Children will always grow into adults, but what they become as adults can either be wise or foolish. The same is true for new believers. And thus, it is with great fascination that we find Solomon directing the weak and vulnerable to read on.

"To give subtlety to the simple" is a preparatory lesson for youth to begin asking questions. The unfortunate problem that we face in this phrase is that "subtlety" usually brings to mind the cunning and craftiness of the serpent.

*"Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not each of every tree of the garden?"*

**Genesis 3:1**

The moment we think of subtlety in the midst of innocence, we rush to the image of satan and come to conclude that all questions are foolish, misleading, and end in destruction. Quite the opposite, in fact. Subtlety can lead to one of two things: Craftiness or Prudence. The former means that one has the intention of purposeful manipulation while the latter means that one has good sense to ask questions when something is unclear (careful management of received input). Unfortunately, because so many questions in our present day are asked as a means of "baiting" someone into a trap, we identify with the craftiness of satan and tend to fear anyone who does not immediately conform. Youth are easily the most vulnerable to this pressure of conformity because they do not know enough to ask the *right* questions. Lest we find ourselves crushing the eager questions of a maturing young mind, Solomon asks that these words of wisdom be extended to the youth. And perhaps those who are not so naïve can also take a lesson in being prepared to answer their questions (Colossians 4:6).

"To the young man knowledge and discretion" provides a key to the previous phrase. For it is not craftiness that this wisdom will produce, but prudence (sensitivity). Give the Book of Proverbs to a young man and note his response. If, in a final reading, he claims that it was a waste, then he has not truly been reading. If, on the other hand, he hands it back and asks a question or two, then he has indeed taken it in and will likely come back to it at another time. In either case, Solomon is compelled to have a simple mind enriched by the discretion and subtlety that comes with proper instruction.

Perhaps you believe that you are the "simple" recipient of this message. Maybe you have high hopes that your children will grow in sensitivity and prudence where you have fallen short. To both of you and all others, Solomon's prescription for wisdom is still the same: Read on... We're only getting started.

## WISE LEADING THE WISE

(Proverbs 1:5)

*"A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels."* **Proverbs 1:5**

Take a few moments to pause and bring to mind a friend, an elder, a father, or a mother to whom you credit wisdom. Few will have difficulty thinking of this individual because they are rare enough not to be forgotten. If you have this person at the forefront of your mind, try picturing them at a desk with two books visible. On their left side is a great novel of literature that they have long enjoyed. On their right side is the Book of Proverbs. Given several hours of free time on this imaginary evening, which book do you see them picking up to read?

Wisdom thrives off of wisdom. I once heard it said that we become the average of the five people we're around the most. This type of teaching is often promoted at "get rich quick" seminars as a means to encourage the poor to "hang out" with the wealthy and perhaps gather the crumbs of financial prosperity. Obviously taken to such an extreme, we can find plenty of fault in the concept, but the original principle is still worthy of consideration. Think of the people you spend the most time with during the week. Do you resemble them in your character, in your mannerisms, or in your choice of words? Husbands and wives sometimes find over the years that they can finish each other's sentences because they think on the same page in almost every respect.

"A wise man will hear" introduces two important questions. Ought a man live with his ears open or closed? and What is it that he hears? To the first, we have our answer in the following phrase. No one can "increase in learning" if they live with their ears turned off. Thus, he who is wise is always listening to both his friends and his opponents (impartial in the hearing, but wise in the discernment of what has entered his mind).

As to the second, there is only a rational answer found in yet another question. Should a wise man hear foolishness? On the one hand, we're quick to say no. On the other hand, how will he know to distinguish between foolishness and wisdom if he has only heard one and not the other? Surely the ability to discern, or even rightly divide, must be based on the input of multiple sources. Thus, we find ourselves at Solomon's intended thought.

"A man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels." We've all heard and seen the phrase, "blind leading the blind." He who is a fool can only lead his follower unto a foolish destination. However, he who is wise can do both. This is a crucial point. To have just one wise counselor is to risk the possibility (not the certainty) of a manipulative guide. To gather several wise individuals around yourself is to diminish the possibility of dangerous knowledge. What's most troubling in this present day, however, is what we brought to mind in the opening paragraph. Those who are wise are difficult to find and even more difficult to know.

*"For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war: and in multitude of counselors [there is] safety."* **Proverbs 24:6**

Most of us have been known to fancy the teachings or the leadership of a man or woman that we find to be wise. And to this end, how many of us would be willing to follow that person into war if they asked us to do so? On this I do not speak of the blood stained fields of revolution, but of the wars we fight amongst ourselves. Have we felt it our duty to align ourselves with one wise man and take up arms against our brothers for their perceived theological error or have we trusted in a multiplicity of wisdom where unity is more likely to be discovered?

Return to that quiet evening we first imagined, but this time consider that the individual at the desk is you. Make your choice and read on.

## RIDDLE ME THIS

(Proverbs 1:6)

*"To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings."* **Proverbs 1:6**

Some time ago, my wife and I visited a nearby science museum in which there were many puzzles and logic problems to solve. Visitors could find, for example, a set of twenty nails and be asked to figure out how all of them might fit on the single head of a larger nail. On this particular day, one of the local schools had sent their middle school students here on a field trip. As we would ponder over each puzzle, some of the children who had figured out the solution would come up and ask, "Can I show you how to do it?"

More than a century before Solomon, we find the infamous Samson asking a riddle of his Philistine audience that they must solve within seven days (Judges 14:12). They appear willing to hear it (14:13), but after three days give up (14:14). And by the seventh day, rather than accept what they do not know, this sad showing of foolishness is given:

*"And it came to pass on the seventh day, that they said unto Samson' wife, Entice thy husband that he may declare unto us the riddle, lest we burn thee and thy father's house with fire:"* **Judges 14:15**

Sure it seems to our gracious minds that this is unnecessarily extreme, but how many of us can quietly testify that we have been angered by what we did not know? As we quickly discover, Samson's wife weeps before him and her sadness "lay sore" upon him so that he tells the answer (14:17). And there we are brought face-to-face with the manipulation of laziness.

To "understand a proverb and the interpretation" is to hear a word of wisdom and ponder both its question and its answer. Most discouraging, of course, is that not all questions have an index of solutions for us to spy out. Sometimes a proverb will gnaw at our minds for weeks and months until we finally have to put it down from the weariness of our study. And then, unexpectedly, we find the answer in the humbling phrase, "I don't know."

The "words of the wise and their dark sayings" are the words of interpreted proverbs and unanswered riddles (Psalm 49:4; 78:2). Samson asked a riddle because it was worthy to test the mental endurance of his hearers. I've often been one to tell riddles at work to pass the time, but more often than not, people crave the answers more than they crave the opportunity to think about the questions. Truth be told, most solutions are found in their original questions if the speaker merely says, "Listen to what I'm saying carefully."

Likewise, Solomon is preparing students for a long list of riddles that they will have to consider, chew on, and eventually answer. If we are to read on, then we must be prepared for such things. We must be willing to think, willing to know, and willing to not know. Therefore, in order to playfully get your mind in gear for a thinking man's journey, ask yourself the following puzzle: What day would yesterday be if Thursday was four days before the day after tomorrow? Depending on when you read this, the answer is unlikely to be today.

## AT FACE VALUE

(Proverbs 1:7)

*"The fear of the Lord [is] the beginning of knowledge: [but] fools despise wisdom and instruction."* **Proverbs 1:7**

When we imagine the brilliant men of history, it's easy to picture the likes of an Albert Einstein whose hair was so disheveled that he appeared never to sleep or rest his mind. Men of his nature have frequently been accused of thinking too much about things that really ought to be taken at face value. To his credit, much in this world requires deep thought and pondering, but not all requires such intense examination.

Proverbs 1:7 is praised by most commentators and writers as the purpose of Solomon's writing, but I find that there is a humbling truth behind their common conclusion. If the fear of the Lord is the "beginning" of knowledge, then it would follow that knowledge does not lead to the fear of the Lord. The fear of God is not something that we study hard to prove, it simply is what it is amidst our limitations of humanity. He is God and we are not. That alone should give pause.

It is an unfortunate curse of knowledge that many within our dispensationally-minded circles would pull out the phrase "fear of the Lord" and rationalize it as nothing more than a Hebrew requirement of law. Let us not be caught up in the nonsense of hypocrisy by ignoring the words of Paul's own pen. The present Body of Christ is asked to note those who have no fear of God (Romans 3:13-18), to fear the severity of the Lord by the example of Israel (Romans 11:20-22), to submit ourselves to one another in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:21), and even to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Using the Greek word, *phobos* (or *phobia* as we think of it today), mention is even made to recognize the "terror of the Lord" (II Corinthians 5:11).

If a man has no fear of the Lord, then he will certainly not obtain knowledge. If he does not obtain knowledge, then he will have no chance at wisdom. And if he has no wisdom, then he is merely a fool who hates what he has not been willing to receive. May we not become so overly caught up in the details of understanding that we miss the recognition of He who has been merciful. This day and all others, take the fear of the Lord at face value (Romans 14:10-12).



**NOT AS I DO**  
(Proverbs 1:8-9)

*"My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: for they [shall be] an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck."* **Proverbs 1:8-9**

With the rise in technology, classrooms have been invaded with iPods, laptops, and text messaging. Students can now be found with plenty of distractions to escape from the lecture. There are, however, a few professors and teachers who lay down the "no cell phone" rule from the start. Bitterness spreads from seat to seat, however, when the condemning professor excuses himself for an important call.

The much used "do as I say, not as I do" is condemned by many of our children who look at their parents for what they are not, rather than for who they are. By this I mean to suggest that it is common for people to ignore the instructions given them if the provider does not abide by his or her own rules.

To be sure, Solomon did make many foolish choices in his life, not the least of which was the marrying of many women; a truth to which we'll find he soon discourages. Yet we find that he calls upon his son to hear of instruction regardless. This is crucial. Who is the most likely to have the greatest impact on wisdom if not a man who has also failed miserably? Recall the condemned rich man of Luke 16 who cries out to Abraham from the flames and says that his family and friends will now believe the truth if someone from the dead goes to visit them. The rich man is crying out for an opportunity to tell those he loves about his own error. The wise king Solomon is no less a father when he requests the attention of his son.

Likewise, he points that same child to "forsake not the law of thy mother." Curiously, the statement can also be understood in the reverse: forsake not thy mother in law. A mother is a mother because she has protected you or your spouse from the womb. If she has labored for you both physically and spiritually since your conception, then her instruction is rightfully authoritative. Precious discoveries lay in wait throughout the rest of Proverbs as we unlock the mystery of mothers, wives, and women.

Children receive an "ornament of grace" on their heads when they are able to honorably take the instructions and laws of their parents in the midst of seeing those same parents in error. Again, this is crucial. Our entire understanding about God's gift of grace is bound to the truth that we were not deserving. Neither can a son or daughter find that their parents are always deserving of obedience, but we ought to know that honor is not conditional. Rather, it is essential.

Some of you may rightly see the "chain" around this child's neck as a chain of gold that reflects the social praise of the day. I would suggest a slightly different rendition. Chains are a weight that resemble the burden of subjection and obedience. If a child is honoring to his father and mother amidst any flaw they have, he or she must endure the temporary weight of mandatory law. Thus, what we find in this well-instructed and honorable son is an adolescent balance between law and grace.

Solomon speaks of wisdom while knowing that he himself has fallen short of what is expected. We find the same humility of mind when Paul declared himself the "chief" of sinners (I Timothy 1:15). Fathers who look upon themselves as weak for their failures ought to stand tall lest their children might prey upon them. Wives who know of their husband's error ought to help him stand up. And the two shall be as one before their children.

## CONSENTING ADULTS

(Proverbs 1:10)

*"My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not."* **Proverbs 1:10**

Righteousness has, more recently, been tagged by the secular world as that which is acceptable before two consenting adults. In other words, if a husband is drawn to another woman outside his marriage and that woman consents, then no one can call it wrong. We might recognize this as the teaching that all truth is relative. Foolishly, many have come to believe that your truth is no longer my truth because we each have our own rendition of what is right and wrong. Such a notion has even extended from consenting adults to consenting children who are praised for their disobedience.

These children are the vulnerable minds that Solomon wishes to warn. Sinners, of which we are all counted equal (Romans 3:23), will invite a child to that which he does not know to avoid. How, then, can he escape the snare of sin if he has no knowledge of it? The king is not asking his son to avoid the hearing of enticing words, but rather, to hear them, identify them, and turn them away. With age and experience, that same son will eventually learn how to steer clear of the original temptation, but not during his youth. An adolescent mind is clear of all things and is thus taught to distinguish between what is good and what is evil. If he is merely taught what is good, he will more easily break to what is evil because he does not recognize it.

For so many of us as parents and teachers, we seek to shield our children from all the dangers of a nearby pack of wolves. When they wander out of our reach and unknowingly approach what they have never seen or been taught, our kids fall prey to every bite and every pain that comes from being eaten alive. On the other hand, for those who have taught their loved ones early, a stronger possibility exists that they will stand in the face of temptation and say, "I do not yield even for a moment." Might they still fail even after we warn them? Indeed. But as they mature from childhood to adulthood, their battles are no longer ours to face.

Teach your children what is right from wrong, what is true and false, what is just and unjust. Then set them at liberty and give them a chance to stand tall. In your absence, they may be found whispering the Scripture, "if sinners entice me, I will not consent." And to your joy, it will be the Word of God that sets them on the path to righteousness (II Timothy 3:14-17).

## FORESHADOWED TRAPS

(Proverbs 1:11-14)

*"If they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause: Let us swallow them up alive as the grave; and whole, as those that go down into the pit: We shall find all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil: Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse:"* **Proverbs 1:11-14**

Fathers driven by a love for football can often be found roughhousing with their boys in the backyard or a nearby park. Giving them every possible instruction on how best to play the game, the inevitable day must come when the child steps onto a real field in full uniform and labeled jersey. The grass may be wet, the players may be bigger, and the stadium may swallow the child alive, but the rules haven't changed. He will either grow into the game or find it is not his game to play.

In the verses above, Solomon passes a riddle to his son about the enemy that he is going to face. The king is warning his son against the manipulation of those who would attempt to take his life to the grave, steal his property, and empty out his kingdom of fortune. In other words, the sinner is setting a trap not for a randomly innocent character, but for the king himself.

Read over the passage again carefully and consider whose blood they are lurking to capture. Who is the innocent that they seek to trap? Who do they intend to swallow up in the grave? Whose precious substance and property is most desired in the land? And who holds the greatest spoil worth stealing?

In the age of Solomon there was a very personal issue in play. Several years after the king's death, Rehoboam, his son, lost the unity of his father's kingdom (II Kings 12). Thus, the nation of Israel under Solomon's son was divided into the Kingdom of Israel (spearheaded by Ephraim in the north) and the Kingdom of Judah (aligned with Benjamin in the south). Although he lost the greater kingdom, Rehoboam lived a rather full life with many wives and many children in keeping with his father's actions rather than his instructions.

Aside from the political is a more personal lesson. Indeed it can be said that the appeal of a sinner is the spoil of his promise, but to what do we owe this illusion of promise our attention? Do we not already have the inheritance (Colossians 3:24)? Do we not already have the riches of glory (Ephesians 1:18)? Seems the one and only chance that our enemy has to weaken our knowledge of this truth is to deceptively entice brothers to turn against brothers and thus destroy themselves in the process.

This wisdom was pressing for Solomon and it is pressing for us today. Many who now serve the cause of God's grace are in a civil war with one another. The enemy looks at the success of his entrapment to see that our battles are no longer aimed in his direction, but are instead blindly fought against ourselves. May we not fall into the trap of a battle we are not prepared to face. We are on the field and we have the uniform (Ephesians 6:10-17). Take the hands of your teammates and move forward.

**ROAD RUNNER**  
(Proverbs 1:15-19)

*"My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path: For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood. Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird. And they lay wait for their [own] blood; they lurk privily for their [own] lives. So [are] the ways of every one that is greedy of gain; [which] taketh away the life of the owners thereof."* **Proverbs 1:15-19**

Soon there will come a day when the phrase "Road Runner and the Coyote" will make absolutely no sense to anyone. That day is not today, however. Either as adults with our children or as children ourselves, we've all seen an episode or two in our lifetime. We've seen the coyote drop bombs, fall from every cliff, or hop into a pair of roller skates to chase a bird. And every time, our laughter comes naturally at the expense of his losing battle. The coyote will simply never catch the road runner.

With every chase, our amusement is entertained not by the speed at which the runner runs, but with the ignorance by which the sly animal operates. Speaking to a much more real audience, Solomon directs his son to avoid the road altogether. He says to "walk not" where the sinner walks, neither should he place a foot in their "path." For in each hunt, the sinner does not care if he catches you or the person behind you. They merely spread their nets "in the sight of any bird." Oddly enough, the vast majority of birds know to fly around such a foolish net.

What you may find disappointing is that the design of the *Road Runner* series, while very much amusing, was intended to draw sympathy for the enticer of schemes. Notice that in every image, the coyote is scrawny and clearly in need of something to eat. Thus, his efforts are seen as necessary while the potential victim is portrayed as silly and rather arrogant for the constant escapes. In a sense, we WANT the coyote to catch the Road Runner. This would, to us as the viewer, seem the only fair answer to his many plots. If he can catch the bird just once, perhaps we will be satisfied that he did so. But taken to its greater truth, if the Road Runner is caught, the show is over.

*"Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."* **Ephesians 6:11**

Although we may continue to find ourselves sympathetic to the character of *Wile E. Coyote*, it is the devil who is most "wily" in his methods (ironically, "wiles" comes from the Greek word *methodeia*). At the expense of earlier humor, the devil's cunning is not a cartoon. It is not fiction. It is not legend. And it is not something imagined. If he catches you, he will destroy you and everyone around you (I Corinthians 5:1-5).

Solomon has made it clear that the enticer lays in wait for his "own blood," but as we already saw, he will do everything to bring his enemy down with him. He is greedy. He is sly. He is cunning. And if he can trap you, then he can "taketh away the life of the owners." Our enemy does not just want us, he wants our family, our friends, our loved ones, and everyone that we come into contact with. Henceforth, if you are already playing the cat-and-mouse game with the devil, for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ, take your foot off the path.

## **SHE TALKS TOO MUCH**

(Proverbs 1:20-21)

*"Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the street. She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words, [saying],"*  
**Proverbs 1:20-21**

Ten-year old Sarah came home one day to hand her father the report card she had received. He pulled it out of the envelope to find that there was a note attached. The child's teacher had written, "Sarah is a smart little girl, but she has one fault. She talks too much during class. I have an idea which I am going to try that may break her of this habit." Sarah's father signed the report and resealed the envelope. The following day when the teacher opened it, she found a reply from the father, "Please let me know if your idea works so that I can use it on my wife."

Both secular and Christian men alike have consoled one another on the false conclusion that a female voice is better kept to itself. Surely perpetuating the illusion that she is merely to be seen and not heard, men find it easier to view her as an object than the very "help meet" God created her to be on his behalf (Genesis 2:18). One of the greatest riddles in this book is that "wisdom" is represented as a feminine noun. In other words, wisdom is not something masculine or "manly." This alone ought to raise some eyebrows.

"Wisdom crieth without" may seem an odd phrasing to us, but it more simply indicates that her voice is not an "inside" or "hushed" voice. Such wisdom cannot be kept in a basement or locked up in a closet, but must go outside (without) to be heard. "She uttereth her voice in the street" furthers that idea by saying that wisdom does not merely walk outside of her own home to speak, but that she is mobile.

When wisdom finds herself in the "chief place of concourse" and in the "openings of the gates," she is not afraid to walk right into the very center of public life. "In the city she uttereth her voice" because it needs to be heard and she knows it. This is not, by contrast to the movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a voice crying out for equal rights. She is not speaking because of what she herself lacks, but because of what everyone else fails to realize they need. They need her.

With a voice that begins in the home, goes out into the street, and walks directly into the heart of the city, wisdom makes herself known. Whether her household, her neighbors, or her countrymen will hear her, such concerns are the primary subject of Proverbs. Hardly a man of good conscience can stand to ignore the voice of wisdom. He may declare that she talks too much, but I am compelled by the Word to announce that she is not heard enough.

## IGNORANCE IS BLISS

(Proverbs 1:22)

*"How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge?"* **Proverbs 1:22**

Weeping with words from the halls of Cambridge University in 1742, 26-year-old Thomas Gray poured out his sorrow into a poem that closed with these most memorable words that made him famous: "Ignorance is bliss." His hundred-line "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" followed the death of a good friend and managed to sink into the fabric of our minds. When we face troubling situations, we look at those who are free from our troubles and think, "How fortunate they are. They don't have to deal with the things that I know. They don't have to endure my sorrow and my tears."

Such thoughts cause us to wonder whether "the simple" should really grow out of their simplicity. Why should a child "mature" if he is only going to find things that discourage him? Why should a child "grow up" if he is only going to face the death of a friend or the unexpected loss of a parent?

But consider the alternative. Children who live in ignorance tend to "tease" and "mock" those that they do not understand. Two young boys sitting in a restaurant are more likely to giggle at the handicap of a nearby woman than two adults who are cautious with their eyes and their words. Why do they laugh? Why do they snicker? Surely it is not because they have knowledge of another's circumstance, but because they ignorantly "delight in their scorning." Surely this is not bliss.

Simplicity leads to scorning and scorning leads to greater foolishness that rejects what it does not know. Thus, it is wisdom who asks the most important question of her audience. How long will you prefer that condition? How long will you choose to laugh at the infirmities of another you do not know? If simplicity, scorning, and foolishness is what feeds your daily delight, then wisdom foreshadows a miserable existence. If ignorance is bliss, then bliss is its own handicap.

## **THE TURN** (Proverbs 1:23)

*"Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you."* **Proverbs 1:23**

Readers turn pages. Seasons turn colors. Men turn over a new leaf. The word "turn" has about as many meanings as there are pennies in a dollar. If you're near a dictionary, pull it off the shelf and "turn" to the word "turn." You'll find that it has more definitions than nearly all other words in its alphabetic category. With so many uses of this popular verb, it's important to clarify what wisdom is truly asking of her audience when she says, "turn you at my reproof."

Reproof is a variation of the more familiar "reprove." When we "prove" someone, we examine whether they are true or false (I Thessalonians 5:21). Thus, to REprove is merely to investigate again with greater intensity. But what happens when we are the ones being proved? What happens when we are the ones being examined? Are we somehow above reproof?

*"Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try my reins and my heart."* **Psalm 26:2**

Grace students and teachers are fond of II Timothy 2:15 because of its emphasis on the right division and proper handling of God's Word. Yet, how often do we find ourselves believing that we are above the "approval" that the same verse speaks? If a man teaches something from the Word, how is the listener to know if it is true except that he be tried by the very same Word?

Only in the acceptance of reproof does wisdom say, "I will pour out my spirit unto you" and "make known my words unto you." (This should not be mistaken with the Spirit poured out prophetically in Joel 2:28-29 and fulfilled in Acts 2:17-18.) The spirit of wisdom is a very real, very present, and very timeless treasure that even the Apostle Paul prays for within the Body (Ephesians 1:17).

If you desire knowledge, make the turn. Wisdom is worth the reproof.

## THE MORNING AFTER

(Proverbs 1:24-26)

*"Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh;" Proverbs 1:24-26*

Soon after the presidency of Jimmy Carter came to a close, young and old alike were brought face to face with a new phenomenon. Music TeleVision was praised by young people who found it fascinating while the older generation condemned it for the dangers that it was likely to produce. Although the "music video" idea has been adapted in churches and ministries abroad, few need to reflect on the vast moral boundaries that have been destroyed since MTV was introduced on August 1, 1981. Duran Duran, one of the first bands to synthesize their way into the Top Ten charts had these famous lyrics from 1982: "Don't say a prayer for me now, save it till the morning after."

Children were indeed preyed upon by the multi-media world, but words such as these became a statement that still rings heavy among the procrastinators of unbelief. "I'll get around to it tomorrow." But what happens when tomorrow is their end?

Wisdom prophesies of a time when the "call" will be "refused," a time when the "outstretched hand" will be disregarded, and a time when "counsel" and "reproof" will be "set at nought" or *refused*. Every aspect of this contempt is to be carefully noted as relating to the nation of Israel, rather than the Body of Christ. Refusal of the "call" is foretold in Jeremiah 35:17, disregard of the "outstretched hand" proves God still merciful in Isaiah 9:12, and refusal of the Lord's "counsel" agitates Him in Isaiah 30:1. These references can hardly be exhaustive or implicit because there is so much unaddressed, but the warning of this primary passage ought to highlight, more than anything, the risk that Israel takes in her historic audacity. They who are lost in the present day will fare no better.

We ought to be rather terrified of the statement that wisdom would "laugh" at the "calamity" of they who refused for so long. What's worse, the image of God "mocking" their sudden fear ought to bring chills.

*"The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming." Psalm 37:13*

The children of unrighteousness may well ask for delayed prayers and Blackberry faith, but when the morning cometh, only the Lord will have the last laugh.



## THE EMPTY WHIRLWIND

(Proverbs 1:27-28)

*"When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me;" Proverbs 1:27-28*

Oklahoma tornadoes can often rise up within minutes of a storm causing businesses and schools to hunker down and follow the rules of self-preservation. Years ago, I recall being asked to get under my desk with my hands wrapped around my knees. Long before the cell-phone age made it simple enough to check on a passing disaster, teachers and school administrators would have to evaluate the conditions themselves. Believing that the bulk of the whirlwind had faded, many of the children, myself included, plastered ourselves to the double doors that faced the playground to see what we could see. My memory brings to mind a faded yellow sky with scattered objects all across the neighboring road. All was quiet. All was empty. And we all felt a chill in the warmth of that spring day.

We can hardly appreciate the grace of God that we've been given without also acknowledging the awful image of desolation, destruction, whirlwinds, and worst of all, a place where God is no longer listening. The desolation of Israel is prophesied on many occasions, but tends to be most remembered for Christ's words in Matthew 24:15. The whirlwind, however, has a more far-reaching implication. We see Elijah carried to heaven in the midst of a whirlwind (II Kings 2:11), we see God speaking through a whirlwind (Job 38:1), but more strikingly, we see that God uses the whirlwind to scatter Israel among the nations so that when they call, He will not hear them.

*"Therefore it is come to pass, [that] as he cried, and they would not hear, so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the Lord of hosts: But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate."*

**Zechariah 7:13-14**

Surely the terror of this empty whirlwind (a place where the Father of mercies is no longer listening) leaves us safely reminded that our connection has not been broken. The line is still open when we call (Romans 10:12-13). And to they who "call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (II Timothy 2:22), may they know grace and peace both today and forevermore.

**DON'T TELL ME**  
(Proverbs 1:29-30)

*"For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord. They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof." Proverbs 1:29-30*

Just about every one of us have heard the old adage that says, "What you don't know can't hurt you." Pausing to consider that statement, we can't help but disagree. If a soldier doesn't know that his enemy is creeping up, the danger still exists. The absence of knowledge (ignorance) is not exactly a safer place than the fullness of knowledge. In fact, quite the opposite. Now imagine, given the opportunity to know something about his enemy, this particular soldier says to his informant, "Don't tell me, I don't want to know."

For those of us who thirst for understanding, this type of nonsense goes against everything we stand for. Although we are not among those who "hate knowledge," it is important to recognize that such men have always been around. Instead of saying, "I don't want to know," their modern words include, "Don't tell me, let me guess."

Such men live on theories rather than verifiable facts and absolute truth. This can be clearly seen by the absurd integration of evolution into our elementary classrooms. No man of Darwin can prove their theories and yet we find such theories at the heart of public education. Those who live on the heels of every random opinion most certainly have no "fear of the Lord." Given the "counsel" of the Word of God, they would refuse it as nothing of value. And upon being questioned with "reproof" by the very same counsel, they would mock the very questions they are asked.

There is a reason why such characters will one day call out to the ear of wisdom and find a cold shoulder. God will not laugh at man's calamity except their be men who once had every opportunity to know the truth and turned away at each moment. If someone you love has a tendency to turn their back on knowledge, take advantage of every door that they leave open. God's desire is that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (I Timothy 2:4). Yours are the feet that come preaching what they need. Hands may still be raised to hold you off with words like, "Don't tell me" or "I don't want to know." Stand on the solid foundation of God's Word and tell them anyways.

**LET US EAT**  
(Proverbs 1:31-32)

*"Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them "* **Proverbs 1:31-32**

Storytelling and modern application can have its warm benefits, but sometimes one proverb gives necessary attention to another. Read the verses above and then continue by surveying the words of King David in Psalm 49:

*"[[To the chief Musician, a Psalm for the sons of Korah.]] Hear this, all [ye] people; give ear, all [ye] inhabitants of the world: Both low and high, rich and poor, together. My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart [shall be] of understanding. I will incline mine ear to a parable: I will open my dark saying upon the harp.*

*"Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil, [when] the iniquity of my heels shall compass me about? They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; none [of them] can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: (For the redemption of their soul [is] precious, and it ceaseth for ever.) That he should still live forever, [and] not see corruption. For he seeth [that] wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inward thought [is, that] their houses [shall continue] forever, [and] their dwelling places to all generations; they call [their] lands after their own names. Nevertheless man [being] in honor abideth not: he is like the beasts [that] perish. This their way [is] their folly: yet their posterity approve their sayings. Selah.*

*"Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall consume in the grave from their dwelling. But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me. Selah.*

*"Be not thou afraid when one is made rich, when the glory of his house is increased; For when he dieth he shall carry nothing away: his glory shall not descend after him. Though while he lived he blessed his soul: and [men] will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself. He shall go to the generation of his fathers; they shall never see light. Man [that is] in honor, and understandeth not, is like the beasts [that] perish."*

Whether a man be wise or foolish, they both face the same death. He that has received the "fruit of his own way" cannot bring to eternity what he possesses outwardly. He that has "turned away" wisdom's counsel in favor of his own counsel ("devices") will "prosper" as a fool to his own destruction. Only the "inner house" shall continue forever. Within the house of every believer is a potential feast of sincerity and truth (I Corinthians 5:8). The table is set. Let us eat from the fruit of the Lord's way.

## DADDY'S LULLABY

(Proverbs 1:33)

*"But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil."*

### **Proverbs 1:33**

In 1997, Peter Penrose emerged onto the music scene with lyrics meant to warm the soul and calm the spirit. His song, "Safe in Your Daddy's Arms" appeared on a childhood lullaby album called, "Sing Me to Sleep." At each hearing, one could picture the silhouette of a father rocking his crying infant in the darkness of night while the rain fell outside. As though singing to his own daughter, Penrose whispered these touching words:

"Let the wind blow. Let your cares go. You're safe in your daddy's arms. Let the rain fall. And through it all, you're safe in your daddy's arms. Safe. Safe. In my embrace, you're safe in your daddy's arms."

The simple hope of this gentle father was that his children would hear his soft voice and know that they were safe.

During the recent holiday, I was fortunate to have the opportunity of holding my newborn nephew after he had woken from a nap. As the family looked on, my arms served as a temporary cradle. The instinctive tone of my voice became soft as he whimpered. When the moment was over and he returned to his parents, I was reminded of how comforting it is for a child to know the voice of his mother and father.

Although we do not hear the audible voice of God as men once did in ages past, His precious Word has been given us that we might know the gentle comfort and peace that He offers us as an alternative to the ways of the world (Romans 10:17). Through His Word, we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that our God is a God of comfort and a God of consolation (II Corinthians 7:6-7, Romans 15:5). When we are weak and in need of rest, He is our strength and our shelter (II Corinthians 12:10).

This closing verse of Solomon's preamble to wisdom is probably the most soothing. Everything prior has been written as a near ultimatum for learning wisdom, but here we find words of warmth. He who "hearkens" unto wisdom shall "dwell safely." Likewise, where safety resides, so does peace and quiet. This is a great edification. Wisdom is, by its very design, the instrument of the heart and mind that leads to peace in knowledge. And once a man has found the peace that "passeth all understanding," Philippians 4:7-9 says that he has the company of truth, honesty, justice, purity, love, reputation, virtue, and praise. For such an amazing lullaby of safety, may we all think on these things and find peace.

## **CALLER ID**

(Proverbs 1: Review)

With every ringtone and vibration of our cell phones and home phones, we each have the same knee-jerk reaction. Almost without thinking anymore, we look down to the Caller ID. If it's someone we want to talk to, we answer. If it's someone we don't want to talk to, we let it keep buzzing. We make thousands of decisions about how we want to spend our time and any number of calls can take us into any number of conversations.

The first chapter of Proverbs allowed us to get a foretaste of who wants our attention. Wisdom is the voice on the other end of the line, but she can be intimidating, humbling, and even complicated (1:1-6). Given the chance, wisdom will warn you of the dangers you didn't see coming (1:7-19). Ignored, wisdom will laugh at you, mock you, and even leave you lonely (1:20-30). But heard long enough, wisdom will provide nourishment, comfort, and peace (1:31-33).

You've seen the ID, now answer the call. Wisdom is about to begin a conversation and we all need to be on the receiving end.

## THE HIDDEN WORD

(Proverbs 2:1)

*"My son, if thou wilt receive my words and hide my commandments with thee;"*

### **Proverbs 2:1**

In between the southern border of Russia and the northern border of China sits the 19<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world. For a period of just four minutes and seven seconds on March 29, 2006, citizens of western Mongolia were able to witness the most recent Total Solar Eclipse. Such a rare occurrence could not be missed as the moon passed between the earth and the sun to temporarily hide all natural light from our planet in that particular location.

The Greeks spoke of things "hidden" through two very similar words, *kalypto* (from which we get *eclipse* and *apocalypse*) and *krypto* (from which we get *cryptic* and *cryptography*). Both have essentially the same meaning, but might help us in contemplating the extensive depths of what it means "to hide." In the Hebrew world that Solomon lived and wrote, his father can be quoted as saying:

*"Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee."* **Psalm 119:11**

A key question should arise from both verses. If the "word" has been received, why should it be hidden? After all, if the "received word" includes beneficial truth for the world (such as the gospel or a note of wisdom), it seems only right that we would be quick to tell someone. Hidden words are not visible words, so why are they to be stored under lock and key? For the answer, we again turn to Solomon's father, the ever beloved King David:

*"Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden [part] thou shalt make me to know wisdom."* **Psalm 51:6**

Look at the verse again. Read it several times through. If the Word is not hidden deep within your heart, you will never know wisdom. It is not enough to simply "know" the Word or recite each verse from the memory of the mind. Hear the Word. Study the Word. Know the Word. But during the process, hide the Word inside. For only when the Truth is hidden in our hearts can it be applied.

## APPLICATION OF GRACE

(Proverbs 2:2)

*"So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding;"*

### **Proverbs 2:2**

Some years ago, I counted myself among a "privileged" class of believers who fervently studied the Scriptures under the principle of rightly dividing the word of truth (II Timothy 2:15). Having grown up in a godly Christian home, I knew what it was to love the Lord, but my understanding of His Word was heavily impaired. Those who taught me about right division were a breath of fresh air for my ignorant mind and my knowledge of the truth has been greatly enhanced by their company and counsel. But no longer do I consider this international group of Bible believers to have a conclusive upper hand on the grace that they so often preach. This requires explanation.

The Word of God makes evident that merely to have answers is not sufficient if our answers are not provided through the heart-driven application of grace (Colossians 4:6). Paul speaks frequently about the servanthood of believers in Christ who must do what they do from the heart, rather than the mind (Ephesians 6:6). What I have discovered in my short experience with men of "sound mind" is that they all too often lack a "pure heart" (II Timothy 1:7, I Timothy 1:5).

David and Solomon combined seven times to speak about the application of the heart (Psalm 90:12, Proverbs 2:2 [above], Proverbs 23:12, 22:17, Ecclesiastes 7:25, 8:9, 8:16). Application is defined by the idea that something known (even grace itself) is put to practical use. If we know grace and we fail to apply it through practical wisdom, do we really have the understanding that we say we have? Or might we be leaning on the crutch of our minds instead of our hearts?

To clarify my opening, I count myself "blessed" to have the fellowship of like-minded saints in Christ who rightly divide the word of truth. But by the same Word that we together study daily, I am compelled to encourage my brethren toward this gracious application of the heart. Let us lean in and "incline" our ears to this softly spoken message. If indeed we have "understanding," then the time is now to begin applying what we know. The heart can always make use of a renewed mind.

## SILVER SEEKERS

(Proverbs 2:3-4)

*"Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures;" Proverbs 2:3-4*

The traditional gifts of an anniversary celebration have been uniquely patterned with the common elements on up to the most rare. In the first year, couples are entitled to receive paper. The eighth year is bronze, the fourteenth year is ivory, and the twentieth year is china. From china forward, the intervals go up by five and the first quarter century, a full fledged 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, is treated with silver. So what exactly is this shiny element that we find mentioned 320 times throughout the Scriptures?

Among the precious metals that are usually sought after, the most familiar in American history is gold. And while both silver and gold will become recurring illustrations throughout the Book of Proverbs, it's important that silver be distinguished from its more popular elder. Gold was sometimes refined with regard to its weight (I Chronicles 28:18), but silver was generally refined for its monetary purposes. Meaning, silver is usually spoken of in reference to the exchange of money (think of Judas and the thirty pieces of *silver* in Matthew 27:3-9). Hence, for someone to seek wisdom "as silver" is to seek the fullness of knowledge over the fullness of a pocketbook.

The most important character of this passage is the seeker. He "criest" for knowledge, he "liftest up" his voice "for understanding," he "seekest" wisdom "as silver," and he "searchest" for wisdom as though he were searching for hidden "treasures." He cries out, he lifts up his voice, he seeks, and he searches. This is not someone who passively assumes that information, truth, and wisdom will fall in his lap.

Some have been quick to generalize Romans 3:11 as meaning that even believers and the children of God do not have the capacity to seek after Him. Hopefully you have not been victim to this teaching. The early chapters of Romans deal with a world gone awry, a world that is guilty, and a world that needs Christ. Thus, among the world, there are indeed... none that seek Him. By contrast, the children of God (such as we are confirmed in Romans 8:16) DO seek Him in every which way that they can. Once we have known Him, we long to know Him more. As He is the giver of wisdom, may we be as the seekers of heavenly silver.



## THE GIVER OF ALL

(Proverbs 2:5-6)

*"Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding."*

### **Proverbs 2:5-6**

During the great "sermon on the mount" found in the Gospel of Matthew, our Lord Jesus is known to have used several dozen phrases that are now commonplace for pop culture Christianity (from the Beatitudes and Lord's Prayer to "judge not, lest ye be judged" and "seek ye first the kingdom of God"). No doubt many of us can agree that a great number of these passages have been turned into clichéd and overused lingo among the everyday Christians we see and hear. While most of the messages found in this sermon have an immediate and dispensational purpose for the nation of Israel, there are nuggets of universal truth to be found underneath a few of them. One in particular ought to be considered here.

*"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?" **Matthew 7:7-10***

Setting aside the particulars of what the nation of Israel ought to be asking for and which door they need to be knocking on for their promised kingdom, the underlying theme of this passage is more of an indication about the Father's love. If one of God's children has a need, why would they not ask for it? For in the case of bread as an illustration of His Word (Matthew 4:4, Luke 4:4), why would the Lord God of heaven and earth drop a stone in the seeker's bucket? Surely those who live as His sons and ask for understanding shall find it by Him alone.

Often we get so intellectually minded that we won't admit we are "seekers" of His wisdom and "seekers" of His knowledge. We hunger for His truth and we dig through His Word as though we were searching, as it were, for hidden treasure. If indeed we proclaim that the Jews were once seekers of signs while Greeks sought after wisdom (I Corinthians 1:22), then indeed we ought to recognize which side that we fit in this age of grace. Only out of the mouth of our Almighty God cometh wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Search for these things like the silver of Proverbs 2:4 and there you will find a fuller comprehension of what it is to fear the Lord. **SEEK** the knowledge of truth and you shall **FIND** it.

He has given us life, He has given us breath, and He has given us all things richly in Christ Jesus (Acts 17:25, I Timothy 6:17). To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

## THE BUCKLER

(Proverbs 2:7)

*"He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly."* **Proverbs 2:7**

Thundering battle scenes from the last decade have left an imprint on most of us who have never held a weapon or put on a breastplate. The younger generation have become accustomed to the Matrix or Transformer stages of improbable fantasy fighting, but others find historical satisfaction watching Russell Crowe's *Gladiator* or Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*. These latter films tend to be well researched from the setting and screenplay right on down to the dress and makeup. What would a soldier be wearing? What forms of protection would he have at his disposal?

One of the most common defense weapons was the buckler of antiquity. In preparation for hand-to-hand combat, most frontline soldiers would carry three things in addition to their body armor: A dagger in their belt (Judges 3:16), a sword at their side, and a lightweight buckler across their forearm (I Chronicles 5:18). The buckler was a small round shield designed for the purpose of deflecting an opponent's dagger or sword. Soldiers who were further back in the battle lines would have much heavier shields to protect them from soaring arrows and flying spears. Only if you were a soldier getting in the face of your enemy would you use such a light buckler. The next time you watch a classical fighting scene, no doubt you'll see a great distinction between the shields of the front line (even one-on-one combat) and the shields of the back line.

When Proverbs refers to wisdom as the "buckler," this is applied to those who are "walking" rather than those who are standing still. He who is sitting back in the wings has a role to play during battle as much as the frontline, but the purpose of the buckler is for those in the heart of the action. Thus, a man who "walks uprightly" is a man who needs a deflective tool for the weapons that come against him. And in this case, the buckler that protects him is wisdom.

*"Wisdom [is] better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good."*

**Ecclesiastes 9:18**

Our Apostle Paul taught Timothy to "war a good warfare" (I Timothy 1:18), but the war we are in is not carnal any more than the weapons we must use (II Corinthians 10:4). The armor of God comes with many untouchable pieces and the buckler is just one such example (Ephesians 6:13). The Lord our God "layeth up sound wisdom" at our disposal. Take it as your buckler and fight the good fight.

## **PATHFINDER**

(Proverbs 2:8-9)

*"He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints. Then shalt thou understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path."*

### **Proverbs 2:8-9**

At the top of Mount Rainier National Park in Washington state, anyone eager to hike the mountainside and see the sights can take a variety of different trails. From the entrance signs to the scattered rangers, visitors know not to travel too far off the beaten path. Deviation from the assigned way is a safety risk. The edges are steep, the snake holes are plenty, and somewhere in the 35 square miles is at least one black bear.

Recently walking a fair distance on one of these trails, my family and I encountered a fallen tree and a sign next to the way which essentially warned: **THE BEATEN PATH ENDS HERE, ANY FURTHER WALKING IS AT YOUR OWN RISK**. These were not the exact words we were reading, but they were indeed the words that we understood. We could stop and turn back, having walked the extent of what was already prepared for us, or we could push forward and create our own path with no real direction. My wife and I stepped a few yards beyond the accepted route and then turned around. It wasn't worth the risk if we couldn't be sure where we were going.

The Lord God "keepeth the paths of judgment" for his saints. By this, He is not speaking of divine judgment, but spiritual discernment. Every believer is faced with a myriad of choices from day to day. If we have been hungering and thirsting after wisdom in our spiritual walk, His Word assures us that we will obtain both knowledge and good judgment (Philippians 1:9).

When a fork in the road tells us we have several options, He has "preserved the way" that will allow us to understand the right path (righteousness), the best path (judgment), and the confident path (equity). Given more than one choice in our spiritual walk, you'll never see fireworks shining above your best decisions, but you can be sure that the right road will always be the wisest path. If you are walking in Christ, then wisdom is yours to apprehend. Walk with wisdom and you will find that the "good path" is the course you're already on.

## PLEASANT KNOWLEDGE

(Proverbs 2:10-11)

*"When wisdom entereth into the thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul; discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee:" Proverbs 2:10-11*

Near the end of a satisfying meal, the taste of warm apple crisp is pleasing to the mouth. After picking berries for grandma's basket, the taste of just one mulberry is pleasing to the tongue. And at the onset of a runny nose or aching ears, the taste from one glass of orange juice is pleasing to the throat. Assorted fruit is a pleasantry that we all enjoy from time to time as the product of something once planted deep into the earth.

When "wisdom enters" deep into the heart (2:1-2), knowledge becomes "pleasant unto thy soul." The infamous scene from the Garden of Eden offers the example of fruit that was "pleasing to the eyes" (Genesis 3:6). Yet, when they ate of it, Adam and Eve were ashamed and the results were destructive. What was pleasant to the eyes was not pleasing to the soul.

Often times, knowledge has the appearance of pleasure without the benefits when we obtain it. We think that gaining information will help us to outwit or outrank the people around us, but we regurgitate facts with no lasting impression and no personal satisfaction. The problem isn't that we're learning more information. The problem is that we have no idea WHY we're learning it.

Knowledge is meant be assuring for our path and our own walk in Christ. The more you know, the more you have "discretion" and "understanding" in your daily choices. Both are designed to "preserve and keep" you on course. If the knowledge you have only creates strife, emptiness, and a littered path of wreckage, then wake up and look around. But if knowledge is a nourishment to your soul, then taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). Walk worthy of a truth that bears fruit rather than a knowledge that breeds destruction.

*"They ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God;" Colossians 1:10*

## THE FROWARD MAN

(Proverbs 2:12-15)

*"To deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things; who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness; who rejoice to do evil, and delight in the frowardness of the wicked; whose ways are crooked, and they froward in their paths:"* **Proverbs 2:12-15**

First glance always requires a double take. Froward is not a misspelling of forward. It is the most direct and clear cut way of describing someone who is stubbornly disobedient or near impossible to manage. The phrase "to and fro" offers some assistance because it is the equivalent of saying "forward and backward." Thus, a man who walks froward is a man who walks in a "backwards direction." Froward is, in fact, the exact opposite of forward. Nowhere is this more passionately expressed than the Book of Proverbs.

Consider that Solomon describes this man's froward path with words like "darkness" and "crooked." If he walks in darkness, then surely he is missing the lamp of the Word to light his path (Psalm 119:105). If he walks crooked, then surely he is not walking straight. The two go hand-in-hand. Without a lamp to lighten the way, the darkness will naturally lead him on a twisting course because he cannot see where he is going. Add to that a man who has stubbornly chosen to walk backwards and you have a recipe for disaster. At some point, the darkness will lead him to an edge that he didn't see coming.

Now enters the most important question of the passage. Who is this froward man that men should be delivered from? Is he someone we know? Is he someone we've met? Is he someone we'll bump into along the way?

Go back to the "good path" and visualize yourself on it. When you look forward, you see nothing but the lamp, the Word of God, that lights your way. If you turn around, what are the three changes you notice? You're now walking (1) backwards, (2) in darkness, and (3) crooked because you can't see straight. Again ask yourself, who is the froward man?

*"For ye were sometimes darkness, but now [are ye] light in the Lord: walk as children of light."* **Ephesians 5:8**

Wisdom is there to deliver you from yourself (Romans 7:21-25). This froward man is one who "leaves the paths of uprightness" he has already known. Therefore, take the Word and let it resonate. Don't just read it, study it, or examine it. Seek it, search it, find it, and hide it within your heart. The evil inside is a stubborn residue of your flesh that can only be crushed by the presence of a deeper Resident.

## STRANGE WOMEN

(Proverbs 2:16-19)

*"To deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger which flattereth with her words; Which forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God. For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead. None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life." Proverbs 2:16-19*

During the opening chapter, readers learned that King Solomon was deeply concerned about the obedience of a son when the behavior of his father and mother is contrary (1:8-9). The key point resonating for the son, "Do as I say, not as I do." If we stop at this passage for a moment to consider that Solomon himself declares this warning for his son, we can't help but go back to the condemned actions of I Kings 11.

*"King Solomon loved many strange women... The Lord said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: [for] surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, [that] his wife turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as [was] the heart of David his father. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord... Wherefore the Lord said unto Solomon, Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant." I Kings 11:1-5a, 11*

Here we find ourselves face-to-face with a man who took the "incline" of one thousand strange women like the one "strange woman" mentioned above. She "flattereth with her words" by giving insincere praise. She "forsaketh the guide of her youth" and "forgetteth the covenant of her God" by turning to harlotry wherein no parent and no god would have approved. Once a man has given himself over to her "death" he cannot "return again" to the "paths of life" because he is already dead. Only by way of God's exceptional mercy can there be any restoration (Judges 10:11-16).

The primary lesson of Proverbs is found by learning crucial wisdom from Israel's folly. Where they were flattered by false love, we shall take note of sincere love (II Corinthians 8:8). While they were quick to forsake and forget who they were, we shall always remember who we are (Ephesians 2:13-14). When they could no longer "take hold of the paths of [this] life," we shall "lay hold of eternal life" (I Timothy 6:12,19). Out of their historic failure we shall forever have the transcript of what it is to be wise.

## **THE WALK** (Proverbs 2:20)

*"That thou mayest walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous."*

### **Proverbs 2:20**

Easily the most difficult part of our journey in Christ is the walk. More often than not, this is because our preachers of grace fail to see "the walk" as a necessary part of their teaching. Much is made of knowing that salvation comes by placing our trust in the finished work of the cross (Ephesians 1:13, I Corinthians 15:1-4), but we leave many new believers in the dark by our disregard of their necessary "paths of righteousness." We teach them that they are saved by the grace of God, but say it fifty-nine times with different charts and repetitious sermons. Blind as we are to the cost, our congregations leave to face a world that we have not prepared them. Perhaps in many ways, even the long-time men and women of faith have fallen victim to ignoring this most important message.

During the present dispensation, we are called to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4), to walk after the Spirit (Romans 8:1,4; Galatians 5:16,25), to walk honestly (Romans 13:13; I Thessalonians 4:12), to walk by faith (II Corinthians 5:7), to walk worthy (Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 1:10; I Thessalonians 2:12), to walk in love (Ephesians 5:2), and to walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8). If those weren't more than enough reason to consider the importance of our present path, take note of the 8th category: to walk in wisdom (Ephesians 5:15; Colossians 4:5).

The means by which this journey begins have changed from age to age, but the objective of the walk has always been the same. They who are the children of God are to walk "in the way of good" men and good works. Surely we cannot quote the famous words of grace and faith while forgetting that we were "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" that He ordained for our footsteps (Ephesians 2:10).

Each of us share a tough road of faith. Many of our children have abandoned the lessons they learned from childhood. Many of our friends have turned their backs on hearing the gospel. Even within in our own hearts and our own minds, many of us have been struggling to rekindle the passion that once burned for Christ. We feel lonely and wonder why our feet just won't move to the rhythm of God's grace. If you are the one standing still, then let me be a brother who takes your hand. If you are the one walking, then be a brother or a sister to the one standing still. You were never meant to walk alone (Ecclesiastes 4:10).

## ISRAEL'S PROMISE

(Proverbs 2:21-22)

*"For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it."*

### **Proverbs 2:21-22**

Even the most well-intentioned Bible teachers can get caught with a passage like this and end up drawing imaginary application. Some years ago, I recall hearing a pastor indicate that "the land" was a plot of acreage on which they were going to build a new church building. In other words, if they were "walking in the way of good men" and "keeping the paths of the righteous" from the previous verse, then their reward would come in the form of physical property. While many of us are quick to recognize the proper significance of "the land," many Christians are sadly pulled into these misleading messages and it takes a toll on their checkbooks.

Solomon writes this set of proverbs as the second (and to this day, the last and final) head of a United Kingdom in Israel. From the opening line of Chapter Two, readers get in tune with the audience unto whom the king is writing. Solomon is not teaching his son wisdom for the sake of a heavenly blessing or a spiritual gift. He is preparing his son to take responsibility for the land and the nation that belongs to God.

This war over "the land" and who has a right to "dwell" in it goes as far back as Abraham (Genesis 12:7), Isaac (Genesis 26:2), and Jacob (Genesis 28:13). The earliest wars regarding this land are covered between the Old Testament books of Joshua and the First Book of Samuel. A recent documentary in the December 2007 edition of National Geographic shows images of Bethlehem surrounded by a snake-like wall covered in spray paint and topped with barbed wire. Israeli children wandering too far off the beaten path in curious playtime have been found mutilated and torn to pieces in a nearby cave. With all the terror that has long existed in the Middle East, perhaps we can look at Proverbs 2:21-22 and give it more credit than a misleading message about acreage for our church parking lot.

Those who are "perfect" shall remain in the land, where as those who are "wicked" and "transgressors" will be "cut off" and "rooted out." We need to be careful about how we associate perfection with the nation of Israel in this particular context. The great patriarch, Noah, had been "perfect in his generations" because his seed was not corrupted by the offspring of wicked sexual relations (Genesis 6:1-9). In other words, perfection was a reference to sexual purity for the sake of the prophesied bloodline (Genesis 3:15). Solomon has himself been defiled by many "strange women" and he spends much of the Book of Proverbs begging his son to avoid the same path in order that Israel may continue dwelling in the land. In many ways, the underpinnings of Proverbs teach Israel to hear the voice of the wise woman and steer clear of the flattering harlot.

Although we can acknowledge that these age-sensitive words fell on deaf ears at the time, perhaps we might appreciate the depths to which Solomon poured out wisdom for his son's obedience. Our future is not based on an inventory of land in the Middle East, but is instead laid up for us in heavenly realms (Ephesians 1:3). As we set aside the pattern of this world in preparation for a home above, may we live by the principles of wisdom meant to guide our steps for the furtherance of His glory.



## **FULLY AWARE** (Proverbs 2: Review)

One single drive down ten miles of the interstate requires your full attention for any number of unexpected dangers. Think of the last time you drove on a busy highway and ask yourself these questions: How quickly did the other drivers allow you to merge? How many times did you change lanes by necessity? At what point did you feel it was safe to cruise or did you ever turn it on? Most of our actions on the road are determined by external conditions that, in most cases, we are trained to deal with. Every blind spot requires that we turn our head. Every four-way stop requires our patience. So it is with our walk and the conditions we must be prepared to face.

The second chapter of Proverbs offers a set of ageless principles so that the reader may be "fully aware" of the path on which they're about to walk. Wisdom is not simply there to accompany the journey, but to make sure you know where you're going (2:1-2). When the words of wisdom are hidden deep, the Lord will provide you with greater understanding, proper protection, good judgment, and even the pleasant fruit of increased knowledge (2:3-11). Unfortunately, between you and your destination are two people. The first is the froward man inside; the man eager to "leave the path" and walk in darkness (2:12-15). The second is the catalyst of the first. In other words, the froward man inside is looking for any reason to get off the proper path and the "strange woman" provides his fitting temptation (2:16-19). Walking alone will increase the chances of your fall, but walking in the company of "good men" will provide enough hands for standing tall (2:20; Ecclesiastes 4:10). To the nation of Israel, this message was crucial and deeply relevant to her future dwelling place (2:21-22).

In the present day, the stakes are no less important. The Apostle Paul speaks of whoremongers being contrary to sound doctrine (I Timothy 1:9-10). Likewise, such a man should not be named among those who call themselves saints (Ephesians 5:3-5). At the cost of making all good men vulnerable to their froward temptations, the Greek word for "whoremonger" is  *pornos* . And yes, there is no excuse for misunderstanding here.

The children of God, regardless of dispensation, are on a continued path of righteousness. Be fully aware of this path and the many detractors who would love nothing more than to see your present destruction (I Corinthians 5:1-5). Solomon issues the warning and Paul provides the reminder:

*"That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world;"*

**Philippians 2:15**

**FORGET NOT**  
(Proverbs 3:1)

*"My son, forget not my law; But let thine heart keep my commandments:" Proverbs 3:1*

In the event that you were to ask my wife about the quality of my memory, no doubt she would laugh out loud. While many may forget where they placed their keys or their wallet (which are no less a concern for me), my tendency is to be midway through a conversation and lose the intended thought. Within the last week, I've lost a pair of sunglasses, an important set of notes, and even the precise location of my eardrum (even if that sounds absurd).

Fearing this troublesome characteristic of my brain, my return to a university level education in 2005 was coupled with a gift of cards called, "Boost Your Memory Power" by Joel Levy. Laughing as I unwrapped it during our special Christmas that year, my wife and I discussed the study tools that would be essential to a fuller education. By that year, about the only thing that I could cling to in my memory was the Word of God. But why? For what reason could my memory retain the opening lines of every Pauline Epistle or the obscure details of Isaiah, yet it took the life of me to remember what year the Founding Fathers signed the United States Constitution? The answer was simple: you remember what you take to heart (not merely to mind) for the purpose of application. Ten years of burying my nose in Scripture outweighed minimal weeks in a history book.

When Solomon begins this third chapter of Proverbs, a pattern emerges. He first asked his son to hear (1:8), then to receive (2:1), and now to forget not (3:1). Later we will see that the son is asked to despise not (3:11) and attend to (4:20, 5:1) the words that he is being taught. In many ways, this parallels a familiar theme of Ephesians 1:12-13 in which saints are reminded of a time when they first trusted, then heard, and then believed in the gospel of salvation. In the case of Proverbs, the king makes a careful mention to forget not the "law" and "commandments" that are now being given.

A frequent trend among dispensational believers is to associate any and all commands with those pertaining to a former time and another place. Lest we become too caught up in our own regard, Paul himself gives a commandment of marriage (I Corinthians 7:10), a commandment of labor (I Thessalonians 4:11, II Thessalonians 3:10,12) and a commandment for the orderly walk (II Thessalonians 3:6). These commands (*Gk.paraggello*) are contrasted with the traditional commands (*Gk.entello*) of Mosaic Law as found in several other Pauline Scriptures (Romans 7:8-13). In other words, commandments are often given directly by parents or father figures who intend to convey an important instruction for the godly character of righteousness. The trouble is, if a command of the Word is given, regardless of the giver, how can we be sure that it will be remembered?

Our answer is embedded within this very series. Here we read and study. Here we meditate in careful contemplation. In 2005, I may not have been able to recite the timeline of 1787, but the investment of my study from that time to this has now given more significance to the date. What we take to heart is the essence of our foundation and the basis of our understanding. Forget not the law of faith (Romans 3:27). Forget not the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). Forget not the law of love (Romans 13:10). Forget not who you are in Christ.

## LENGTH OF DAYS

(Proverbs 3:2)

*"For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee."* **Proverbs 3:2**

Frustrated by the fading sense of diligence in his teenage son, my father drove me to work many years ago and imparted words of wisdom that I would never forget. "If you ever get to the end of your day, look back, and realize that you haven't accomplished anything, then something needs to change." In other words, an unprofitable day was not a day worth counting (albeit there are days when we just need to rest and recoup). At that time in my life, the walk was just a series of dragging adolescent footsteps. Whether or not he knew it, my father kick started the wheels of my heart and my mind to live a life worthy of the call (Ephesians 4:1).

The most difficult question facing this text is whether or not "length of days" and "long life" and "peace" are gifts of God that we ought to consider implicit to the age of Solomon or if they are applicable to the present day. Can it be said that obedience to the words, laws and commandments of the ever-wise Solomon will provide such rewards? Furthermore, can there even be rewards in this life we live during the age of grace? If your immediate reaction to the last question is hesitant, I fear you might be living an isolated and lonely faith.

For many, the words "length of days" and "long life" are one and the same. But look at them again. To have a *day* of length is to have a *day* that is full of hours. To have a *life* of length is to have a *life* that is full of days. Speaking in terms of measurement, many days add to up to a person's fuller life and thus, the two go hand-in-hand. Yet, before a life can be full, the days must first have purpose or they will end as worthless. In other words, from the moment you rise to the moment you lay down for the night, your mind and heart ought to be at work to the glory of He who created you (Romans 13:12). Be it the age of Adam, the age of Noah, or the age of Thomas Aquinas, you were given life, breath, and existence by the mercy of our Heavenly Father. By the words of wisdom, your days will have purpose. By the words of wisdom, your years will have substance. By the words of wisdom, your life will have peace.

Alas, some pause to ask themselves whether such a message still reigns true. The Apostle Paul teaches that the honor of one's father and mother is essential "that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth" (Ephesians 6:3). Adherence to the wisdom of those who give us our roots is a key to unlocking the peace that the Lord Jesus Christ gave to sustain us in this life (II Corinthians 13:11, II Thessalonians 3:16). Contemplating his own mortality, Paul declared this most powerful affirmation of his condition: "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Therefore, because He lives and because He lives in us, let us seize the day for His glory by remembering and keeping His Word. Let your days in Christ be full, your life in Christ be worthy, and your peace in Christ be ever more joyous.

## **FORSAKEN TRUTH**

(Proverbs 3:3)

*"Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: Bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart:"* **Proverbs 3:3**

During the early stages of Paul's imprisonment in Rome, just a few men from his early ministry had remained. Most notable were Mark and Luke, writers of two gospels and the Book of Acts, as well as the lesser known Demas (Colossians 4:14, Philemon 1:24). Pressure had mounted for many of them to return home because the Italian city was simply not a safe place to call yourself a Christian. At the end of Paul's final epistle (arguably), he writes that "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica... only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee:" (II Timothy 4:11). The word "forsaken" is used with a sense of abandon. Perhaps none of us can surely say that we would risk our lives at the expense of such a cause, but in the final lap of the race, Paul wrote that "all men" forsook him (II Timothy 4:16).

We glance at a story like Demas and Paul not for its immediate relevance to Solomon's proverb, but rather, for its use of the term "forsaken." The order of the words in Proverbs 3:3 can make it seem that truth and mercy are capable of abandoning those who have them. This is not the message. On the contrary we find that this is a reminder to take wisdom, to take mercy, to take truth, and to "bind them about thy neck" and "write them upon the table of thine heart" as a means to protect them from being forgotten (3:1).

Much of the illustrative descriptions of this verse are a parallel to Proverbs 1:9 when we encountered the son who was asked to wear the instruction of his father and mother as an "ornament of grace unto thy head" and "chains about thy neck." Here the author goes one step further from the head and neck when he says to "write them" on the "table of thine heart" (II Corinthians 3:3). In other words, mercy and truth cannot merely be understood by the mind or they will indeed "forsake" thee. How often have we met those who teach mercy and truth from the pulpit, but have not the first clue what they mean from the heart because they have never been applied? In some cases, I have even been witness to "men of grace" who teach that the heart is overrated. These are the victims of forsaken truth.

Some days ago, a woman stood in front of me in the grocery line running shy of the cash she needed for the bags that were already filled. Clearly embarrassed by a holiday gift card that wasn't working, she had a need for the application of mercy. Many of us have been in that line before. That afternoon was a reminder to my heart of one of the most precious lyrics of grace: "A scene so familiar at the old Five & Dime. A little boy waited his turn in line. And with eyes so intent, he proudly displayed the candy he'd buy with the money he'd saved. The girl at the counter wasn't sure what to do because the money was less than the price that was due. Then a stranger spoke up from his place in line. He said, 'Whatever he's short, just take it and add it to mine. I've got you covered.'" (PCD, "I've Got You Covered" 1999)

Her price was paid and her cost was covered. Mercy and truth are more than an exercise of the mind. If we believe in mercy and if we believe in truth, then they must become the operation of our hearts (Ephesians 6:6). May we all clothe ourselves in a lifestyle of grace.

## GOD AND MAN (Proverbs 3:4)

*"So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man."*

### **Proverbs 3:4**

Page after page of the Kings and Chronicles tell the often redundant tale of men and tribes who either did right or did evil "in the sight of the Lord." Each account is given at the end of a reign so as to define the view of God regarding how that period ought to be described. Among the first of these is the author of Proverbs, whose story can be summed up with the following: "Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father" (I Kings 11:6). This truth may shock many who rightly praise King Solomon as the wisest of all men.

When called on the carpet for their actions or their conduct, a common trend among modern believers is to use God as their out. In other words, we jump on the bandwagon of saying that our testimony is only before God and what man thinks is irrelevant. Using Scripture as a proof-text, many will run to passages that speak against being "menpleasers" (Ephesians 6:6-7; Colossians 3:22-23; I Thessalonians 2:4, Galatians 1:10). We are correct if we understand the error of living to gain glory among men (I Corinthians 3:21), but when it becomes our scapegoat to live as we please regardless of anyone else, this is an even greater error that proves we did not and do not fully recognize our place in this world.

Standing before Felix in the governor's court, the Apostle Paul testified that he had "a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24:16). Perhaps most strikingly, he speaks to the Romans noting that they who are servants to Christ are both "acceptable to God" and "approved of men" (Romans 14:18). The contrast is drawn more clearly when Paul speaks to the Corinthians declaring that they "be not the servants of men" (I Corinthians 7:22-23) while later saying that he has been made a "servant to all" (I Corinthians 9:19) for the sake of man's salvation (I Corinthians 10:33).

As the Lord remains patient in His grace, we as believers remain a "spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men" (I Corinthians 4:9). Therefore, Paul affirms that we should be "careful to maintain good works" as they are "good and profitable unto men" (Titus 3:8). Likewise, we are not to "render evil for evil unto any man" as that would be contrary to the grace we have received and live to illustrate before "all men" (Romans 12:17; I Thessalonians 5:15). Such practical lessons are wrapped up in the interest of "providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (II Corinthians 8:21).

Here we return to Proverbs after surveying the ageless wisdom of our testimony before God and man. As the last passage makes clear, an honest life is not merely witnessed "in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men." Thus, he who walks by the light of "mercy and truth" and does not forget what he has been taught shall "find favor and good understanding in the sight of God and man." When you find favor in the eyes of men, there is an open door to share the gospel. Live not to please man; rather, live for the cause of his salvation.

## THE DIRECTOR

(Proverbs 3:5-6)

*"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."* **Proverbs 3:5-6**

In recent years, the practice of skateboarding was frowned upon by many who perceived that it was a dangerous implication of alternative living. Over time, that fear has diminished, allowing for the skillful craft to become a legitimate sport. Whether or not any of us have participated in this trend, we all know that learning to balance our weight on a bike, on a board, or on a tightrope involves trial and error, scratches and burns, falls and accidents. Where you lean determines where you go and your direction is dependent upon that leaning.

Above is one of the most popular passages of the entire Book of Proverbs. From the time that many of us were children, this was deeply rooted into our hearts as an invaluable truth. If you've contemplated these words for years or happen to be reading them for the first time, the verses can be broken down into four crucial points.

First and foremost, to "trust in the Lord with all thine heart" is not an arbitrary or casual reference to how we ought to trust God. Solomon taught earlier that only by the heart can a man apply and keep what he understands (2:2, 3:1). Likewise, it is the heart that receives mercy and truth so that they might be used with wisdom (2:10, 3:3). He who trusts in the Lord with his mind is trusting in what he himself understands. This leads to the second point.

To "lean" on our "own understanding" is to make our understanding a crutch of dependence. Many good students of the Word have been caught in the draft of making allegiances to pastors and teachers who may or may not be teaching according to the truth. By this I mean to express those who come to an understanding of Scripture by way of a particular leader and believe that they owe him without recognizing that they have begun using this person as their crutch. Much like a political campaign where the die hard followers believe that their candidate can do no wrong, there is a tendency among believers to "lean" on human understanding and acknowledge the wrong source.

Point three is simply this: "In all thy ways acknowledge Him." No matter how much we believe we have understood, no matter how much we believe we know, it is not for us to acknowledge ourselves as brilliant scholars of the truth. Interestingly enough, the word *acknowledge* carries with it the message of "crediting" knowledge to whom it belongs. When we credit ourselves or other men for what we know, we find ourselves leaning to the right or to the left of center without the ability to move forward.

Thus, we find ourselves in need of He who can "direct our paths" and "direct our steps" (Proverbs 16:9). Jeremiah recognizes that "the way of a man is not in himself" or "in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). Paul would later acknowledge God's direction toward the Thessalonian people (I Thessalonians 3:11) while teaching them that the Lord will "direct" their hearts "into the love of God" (II Thessalonians 3:5).

We trust in the Lord with all our hearts because that is where we have hidden His Word. We lean not on our own understanding because we are not the source of what we know. We acknowledge Him in all ways because He is the Director of our path. Our direction depends on where we lean. Trust in, lean on, and acknowledge the Lord.

**POINT BLANK**  
(Proverbs 3:7)

*"Be not wise in thine own eyes: Fear the Lord, and depart from evil."* **Proverbs 3:7**

*Meet the Press* began in 1945 as an American radio talk show, but soon joined in the rising popularity of television news by 1947. These days, nearly 3 million viewers of the longest running program in television history tune in at 9am on Sunday mornings to watch Tim Russert interview a political candidate, a senator, a president, or a well-known government official. The environment of the room combined with the gentle intellect of Russert's moderation requires every guest to be on their toes. They know as much as the viewer that this will be a time for point-blank questions and necessary answers that may not come easy.

Sometime during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, "point blank" became a popular phrase among archers who spoke of aiming toward the white portion of their target. Referring to the "point" of their arrow and the "blank" dot ahead of them, this concept spread into usage for any common man's dialogue that involved tough, direct, or "pointed" investigation. Given that targets cannot feel the pain of a piercing arrow, the same cannot be said of human beings who are faced with those piercing questions. At this juncture in our study of Proverbs, the time is ripe for an unflattering self-examination.

Most of the lines, riddles, and sayings of this book require that we use our minds to understand, but we have a difficult time bridging the gap from our minds to our hearts. Talking about the application of the heart is not equal to the application itself, so I find myself looking at such a simple, one-line verse as this and asking very personal, point blank questions of myself. Am I wise in my own eyes (I Corinthians 8:2; Galatians 6:3)? Do I fear the Lord (II Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 5:21)? Have I departed from evil (II Corinthians 13:7; I Thessalonians 5:22)?

Three questions. Three answers. If I consider myself wise, have I not already become a fool? If I do not fear the Lord, have I not already forgotten His sovereignty? If I run into the arms of sin, have I not already spit in the face of my Savior? It is not sufficient to merely look at the text and wash over it with academic swagger. Consider the necessity of God's Word, ask yourself these questions, and apply your heart to the answers that are righteous. Point blank: Are you walking worthy of the call?

## PROMISED LAND

(Proverbs 3:8-10)

*"It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones. Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of thine increase: so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine."* **Proverbs 3:8-10**

Reading through the biographies of George Washington, the creative genius of the Founding Fathers, or the collective sacrifice of revolutionary soldiers, it should come as no surprise that many other nations of the day attempted to make America and its constitution a model for similar results. From the devastating massacres of the French Revolution to the scattered Wars of Independence in South America, all men have eventually discovered that the path to ultimate freedom is a unique charter. Rarely, if ever, can we take the blessings, the promises, or the conditions of one nation and place them on another in order to find the same outcome.

This point is brought before you to illustrate that while Proverbs is filled with ageless wisdom by which we can and should make use, there are times when that wisdom specifies the generous love of God for the nation of Israel. And for those who are not dispensational in their thinking, this should not be offensive. If, given the chance to walk in the Garden of Eden when all was perfect, you could enjoy the one-on-one attention of the Lord for a period of time without anyone else around, no doubt you would snatch up such an opportunity. Neither should we be jealous or envious of those moments in Scripture when the Lord God of heaven speaks with wonderful generosity to His chosen people of Israel. Our task is to be careful that we do not misrepresent or misapply what was intended for their ears and for their benefit.

The people of Israel have, historically, been a people of unparalleled health through the will of God, the master dietician. By excluding the bottom feeders of the ocean or the filthy habits of swine that "cheweth not the cud" (Deuteronomy 14:8), their dietary obedience provided "health to the navel" and "marrow to the bones." The navel, of course, is where life once received nourishment in the womb. Yet, the essential part of man's earliest mobility is in his bones. Good health leads to strong bones and strong bones are filled with marrow. God's Word is even described as that which is able to divide into the "joints and marrow" (Hebrews 4:12).

While the conditions of healthy living might be ageless (with many now eating by the *Maker's Diet* or other retroactive programs), there is no mistaking substance, firstfruits, barns, and winepresses as intentional for a specific audience. Israel had been promised blessing for her "substance" of labor (Deuteronomy 33:11). Likewise, that substance is identified repetitiously as her "firstfruits" and "increase" (Exodus 23:16; Deuteronomy 14:28). In other words, by working the promised land that God had given them and returning to Him the fruits of their labor, the Lord would fill their barns "with plenty" and cause their winepresses to "burst out with new wine."

America, while valuable in its own right, is not a modern day promised land. Neither can we say that God has intended to give plentiful acreage for our churches and our schools if we pretend to give Him the efforts of our labor. In this present age, He has not asked for the gifts of our hands, but the trust of our hearts in the price of Calvary. Find contentment in the sacrifice of Christ and do not "want" for more (Philippians 4:11).



## CORRECTION OF LOVE

(Proverbs 3:11-12)

*"My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of His correction: For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth: Even as a father the son in whom he delighteth."*

### **Proverbs 3:11-12**

At the invitation of a friend and faithful servant of Christ some time ago, I opted to attend a debate on church authority. As it turned out, the debate was less of a forum and more of a dungeon. Flames of hatred were seething from the primary speaker who held to his microphone for more than two hours. Like venom from a serpent, this professing teacher of Scripture stood on the edge of denouncing all who disagreed with him, including my friend, as enemies of the cross. Deeply burdened by his excessively toxic words, my time came to speak. Without hesitation, priorities of grace were of the utmost concern before matters of doctrine could be assessed with any severity.

Believing that this man was favorable to II Timothy 3:16-17 and Scripture as "profitable" for "correction," I asked if he knew how vicious and hateful his conduct had been for those two hours. My question was followed by a quotation of Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man." And before yielding the microphone back to the speaker, I simply asked if he had ever given fair consideration to the passage as he prepared his arguments. Unfortunately, his response was much like this: "I've been studying the Bible for more years than you've probably been alive and I won't be talked to like a child." In other words, being corrected was not an option. Not by me. And certainly not by the Word of God.

What is it within us that hesitates from correction? Do we fear the embarrassment of being in error and someone finding out? Do we perceive that we are without error? Have we set conditions on how or when correction is acceptable?

Chastening is a term used primarily with relation to Israel because it speaks to the punishments that would lead to their hopeful redemption. The Body of Christ is not in danger of being punished or chastened in order to bring about redemption because our price has been paid in full. Correction, on the other hand, is the process of rebuilding; the concept of taking pieces from an impaired lifestyle and starting fresh. Paul refers to this as sanctification for the purposes of God's workmanship (II Timothy 2:19-21; Ephesians 2:10). Beginning the journey of faith in Christ does not remove us from the polluted nature of our flesh (Romans 7:14-25). And for this reason above all, it is necessary that we be "rooted and built up" (Colossians 2:7) so that we do not forget the faith and grace of God both in study and practice.

We need correction more often than we reject it. You and I are recipients of the greatest love a father could ever provide. Furthermore, "whom the Lord loveth He correcteth" and such correction is as necessary as it is difficult. Our condition is resistant to change, hesitant to improve, and often fearful of progress that implies something was previously wrong. The larger the issue and the less personal a problem becomes, the easier we find it is to criticize and correct.

Take time to look inward. Be not "weary of His correction," but be reminded of His eternal love. For you are the sons and daughters in whom the Lord delights.

## PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

(Proverbs 3:13-14)

*"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold."* **Proverbs 3:13-14**

Over the years, television commercials have become far more witty and creative than those in decades past. Geico continues to rotate from the gecko to the cavemen to the celebrity endorsement so that when people think of insurance, one company will stand out above the rest. Southwest Airlines has a familiar "ding" with the words: "Wanna get away" and "You are now free to move about the country." The smile of a child and his classic moments are referred to as "priceless" while the closing sentence is always the same: "For everything else, there's MasterCard."

Rarely, if ever, do readers think of wisdom as a form of merchandise or gain that can or should be advertised. No one can inherit wisdom, nor can anyone purchase it. Silver and gold, as mentioned above, are used when referring to that which comes at a price or that which comes through a royal family. In other words, Solomon cannot pass this gift on to his son like the gold of his kingdom (I Kings 10:14). Neither can the young Rehoboam offer up any kind of financial investment to receive his father's wisdom. It is, quite simply, a happiness that cannot be bought or granted.

When Bing Crosby recorded the famous Christmas lyrics of "Do You Hear What I Hear" during the early 60s, the song was an instant classic. Although it was filled with creative poetry, the third verse ends with the misleading words, "Let us bring Him silver and gold." Surely it can be said that the wise men brought "gold" as one of their three gifts to Christ (Matthew 2:11), but for centuries, men have believed that they were saved to eternal life because of what they brought or because of what they gave (indulgences, tithes, offerings). Many children grow up believing that their salvation depends on the faith of their parents. The things of God have never been flattered by the things of man and it's crucial that we really let this point sink in. For it is not merely salvation that is priceless, but wisdom and the happiness that it provides.

The political author and theorist, John Locke, once suggested in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century that the rights of man should be protected on the basis of "life, liberty, and property." As a landowner himself, this was much easier to say than the alterations Thomas Jefferson made almost a century later. Instead, we now consider it more apt to quote the Founding Fathers when they declared that our rights are to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." While many have distorted "happiness" into their own selfish pleasures and desires, true happiness is found in a heavenly source. They who put their trust in the Lord and retain the wisdom He provides shall be happy (Proverbs 3:18; Proverbs 16:20). If indeed, you have a right to this happiness, then never cease to walk in the path that the Lord has established (Colossians 4:5).

Some things money can't buy. "For everything else, there's MasterCard."

## MORE PRECIOUS

(Proverbs 3:15)

*"She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her."* **Proverbs 3:15**

From time to time, each of us visit a restaurant or a deli where our mouth is treated with a fantastic meal that satisfies in every way. More recently, I've become addicted to a Japanese *Miso Salmon* served on a bed of white rice and Sake butter and garnished with snow peas. Ask me if I could eat it every night and you'd see the enthusiasm dripping from my face. The trouble is, a food overeaten is no longer a favorite. We find the same challenge with music and television when a song gets overplayed or the same program shows up every night. If something we desire can be obtained at every turn, it ceases to be valuable.

Even in Solomon's kingdom, where gold and silver were plentiful, rubies were not quite so common. They are among just a few "precious" stones in the world and gained their English name from the Latin word, *ruber*, meaning "red." While it is easy to quote that wisdom is "more precious than rubies," this leaves a gaping hole between what we read and what we accept. If wisdom is indeed "more precious" than a rare stone, then this ought to be an indication that wisdom is itself near impossible to find. Who among us would dare say that we are wise simply because we know a few things? Knowledge is not sufficient to declare one's self wise. Quite the contrary, if you think yourself wise, then you must also think yourself more rare than a precious stone.

Century after century, men have been proved to desire, more than anything else, what they cannot have. And if they get it, they cease to desire it any longer. This can be seen in our modern world when a young man finds a woman to love and showers her with flowers, dates, and moonlight conversations. Yet, after the wedding, the bride receives no more flowers, no more dinners, and no more fireside chats (It should be said that I find this post-wedding lifestyle among the most destructive factors in American society). By some standards, the new husband can be said to have "captured" his prize and no longer have reason to vie for her affections. And as nature would have it, when he no longer desires his wife, he opens his eyes to others whom he cannot have. Desire is a beast of burden that plagues the flesh and the mind like an endless cycle (Ephesians 2:3).

Consider the things that you desire right now. Make a list in your mind. Now go from item to item on that list and ask yourself what happens if and when you receive them. When you get the perfect car, what replaces that desire? When you find the perfect job, what replaces that desire? When you find the perfect spouse, what replaces that desire? Truth be told, there is no perfect car, no perfect job, and no perfect spouse. Instead, we go after the things that we desire and when they show themselves to have flaws, our tendency is start going after something else. Alas, that endless cycle of desire proves that we need something more sustaining.

Wisdom is among the most valuable things ever testified in the Scriptures. Rare are the men and women who find it, for they can hardly describe what cannot be "compared." In this age of grace we live, eternal life is a treasure we need not seek, for it is already ours in Christ, but wisdom requires our daily search. Remember that the rarity of wisdom is what makes it so valuable. Nothing is more precious to our walk.

## YEARS THAT MAKE US WISE

(Proverbs 3:16)

*"Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour."*

### **Proverbs 3:16**

With a baby sleeping quietly in the next room, Julia Ward Howe took a pen and paper to begin writing a song that would soon lift the spirits of Union soldiers. As an abolitionist and mother of six, she wanted to do so much more, but found that words were a tool more powerful than the sword. In February of 1862 when the Battle Hymn of the Republic was first published in Boston, crowds could be heard singing "glory, glory, hallelujah" to the beat of every march. By her eighty-sixth birthday in 1905, Julia Howe sat down to reflect on her unfinished life:

"Yes, I've had a lot of birthdays and I'm growing very old,  
That 's why they make so much of me, if once the truth were told.  
And I love the shade in summer, and in winter love the sun,  
And I'm just learning how to live, my wisdom 's just begun.

Don't trouble more to celebrate this natal day of mine,  
But keep the grasp of fellowship which warms us more than wine.  
Let us thank the lavish hand that gives world beauty to our eyes,  
And bless the days that saw us young, and years that make us wise." \*

Unlike Howe and the many to whom age is easily measured, the Scriptures do not provide us with Solomon's year of death nor does it provide the age when he began his reign (though we're told he ruled forty years). Based on other historical events within the Biblical text, some historians have calculated that the wise king did not make it to his sixtieth birthday. This detail is significant if only to illustrate that wisdom itself is not a guarantee or a promise of God to anyone that they will have a "long life" as mentioned earlier in the chapter (3:2). Conversely, when wisdom holds "length of days" in her "right hand," this is the essence of self-reflection as found in those who go to bed at night proud of the full day they have lived and walked according to the gift of God's grace.

When wisdom holds "riches and honor" in her "left" hand, note that the truly wise do not aspire to such gain, for they recognize the vanity of this life (Ecclesiastes 11:8). Although they may be "rich" in one way and "honored" in another, every breath is fleeting and every moment is precious. Some readers may remember that God's "right hand" will sometimes hold more eternal value than His "left" (Matthew 25:33), but more often than not, His two hands have an equal balance (I Kings 22:19, II Chronicles 18:18). All that to be said, both hands of wisdom contain gifts that are precious to this life regardless of their assurance or absence thereof.

The pursuit of wisdom is not a guarantee of prizes and glory, but over the "years that make us wise," perhaps we may come to appreciate the days worth living.

\* Richards, Laura E. & Maud Howe Elliott. *Julia Ward Howe, 1819-1910*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915.

## PATHS OF PEACE

(Proverbs 3:17)

*"Her ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."* **Proverbs 3:17**

Often it seems that the more we study and the more we know, the more we begin to push away from those who need us most. Always seeking someone who knows what we know, fellowship becomes an intellectual competition rather than a place for edification and strength. On some level, this justification comes from a belief that our understanding of truth is without error. And if we can just get our point across, it will cut those who disagree like a knife and sting them like a bee. After all, the Word of God is compared to a double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). This is a war, is it not!?

Indeed there is a war, but our gospel and the life that we live was never meant to be ruthless, cold, or isolated. As we discovered in the previous chapter, the deeper our knowledge of truth goes, the more pleasant it should be to our soul (2:10-11). Likewise, the way of wisdom ought to be enjoyed like the sweet juices of fruit to the tongue. Far too many believers look at life as though they were walking on a tightrope. Lean too far to the right and you'll fall off. Lean too far to the left and you'll lose your balance. Life is seen as a series of tiptoed footsteps and any miscalculation will take you off course. We would be foolish to ignore the need for great caution along the path, but the ways of wisdom are "the ways of pleasantness." To find wisdom is to find sweetness where pure knowledge alone can be bitter and tasteless.

When the path is pleasant, we cease to look for battles and places to compete. From time to time, the fighting may show up on our doorstep and we must be prepared to make a defense for what we believe (Colossians 4:6). However, when a wise man goes to pick a fight, he is merely a fool pretending to be wise. This is not a lifestyle of peace.

In this age of grace, eternal peace is granted through the blood of the cross, but what of peace that sustains us during the storms of this life? While ours is a gospel of peace (Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15), there is a continued call to "follow after the things which make for peace" (Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:3; II Timothy 2:22). Likewise, our God is a God of peace (Romans 15:33; 16:20; I Corinthians 14:33; Galatians 5:22; Philippians 4:7,9; Colossians 3:15; I Thessalonians 5:23; II Thessalonians 3:16; ) who calls us to "live in peace" (II Corinthians 13:11; I Thessalonians 5:13). The path has not changed and neither has the God of ages.

Truth be told, there will always be men and women who know more than their brothers and sisters in Christ. Those who have knowledge and flaunt it have very little. Those who have knowledge and start wars have no wisdom. Those who have knowledge and live by it have peace. If your path has no joy, look around and make sure you're walking the right way.

## **TREE OF LIFE** (Proverbs 3:18)

*"She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her."* **Proverbs 3:18**

Legendary stories have carried men into the lands of Great Britain and America searching for fountains, cups, and swords that might have the power of immortality within them. From the *Fountain of Youth* to the *Holy Grail* and even Arthur's *Excalibur*, the tales are typically more grand than the actual experiences. With technology being what it is today, few remain interested in the mystical fictions of yesterday and turn to science as their outlet for eternal life. Hoping to find an end for aging or a method to mask its every wrinkle, each result is the same. Life and death were never man's to find or extend.

Within the realm of Biblical scholarship, none of the above have been as captivating as the faith-based story of the Tree of Life. Of all the trees in the Garden of Eden, only two are noted in the story of creation; the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life (Genesis 2:9). The unique mystery behind these two trees is a riddle all its own. For it was the fruit of one that gave life and the fruit of the other that brought death. When sin entered the world and death therein, the Lord God made a fascinating decision that has driven men to the ends of the earth in wonder. "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24).

The tree of life is mentioned three times in Genesis and three times in Revelation, but no where else in between the pages of Scripture with the exception of four times in the Book of Proverbs. While this may or may not be significant, what stands out is the riddle of its very nature. Adam and Eve only had access to such fruit when they were without the knowledge of death. Likewise, when they were banished from its fruit, they were without the knowledge of life. Thus, to know life was to not know death and to know death was to not know life. Mysteries surely abound on the subject of this tree.

Where the Book of Proverbs differs from Genesis and Revelation is that it refers to "a" tree, rather than "the" tree. In other words, this a reference to wisdom that provides the form, the example, and the replication of life, but does not refer to eternal life itself. He who wishes to live fully from within his dying flesh is called to wisdom. "Happy" is he who both finds wisdom (3:13) and "retaineth" what he has found. For it is only by the wisdom of God that a man finds peace in knowing both the meaning of life and the meaning of death.

They who have been granted eternal life are among those who ought to exhibit the fruits of the "tree" that provided it. For they are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Galatians 5:22-23). Struggling with his own mortality, Paul declared that his life was worth living if for no other reason than to bear the "fruit" of labor in the grace of God (Philippians 1:22). Indeed, a man who has been given the gift of eternal life and does not bear the fruit of that life has shown that he is still searching for another form of temporary happiness that will never be found. For those who have hope in the promise of eternal life through Christ, "lay hold" of wisdom and bear the fruit of life He has given by the Spirit.

## IN THE BEGINNING

(Proverbs 3:19)

*"The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; By understanding hath He established the heavens."* **Proverbs 3:19**

Above the month of January in our office calendar is the image of a female northern cardinal with her feet loosely gripping the snow-filled branch of an evergreen tree. Just outside our front door fly sparrows and finches to their heart's desire in the moderate winds of a South Florida winter. Those that rest and take flight provide a glimpse into the fifth day of creation when the fish and the birds were each provided a home below the earth and throughout the heavens (Genesis 1:20). The beauty of God's ingenuity was that He did not simply toss the living into a void, but first "founded" and "established" the place where they would reside.

From cover to cover, the Word of God is sprinkled with reminders of the Creator, not simply because He created mankind, but because He also created their habitation. All of heaven and earth belong to Him (Psalm 89:11), for they are the work of His hands and no other (Psalm 102:25). He is said to have "stretched out" the heavens, "spread forth" the earth (Isaiah 42:5), and "formed it to be inhabited" (Isaiah 45:18). Lest any man forget his founder or the God who paved every beach with sand, He declares:

*"Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of His understanding."* **Isaiah 40:28**

For many years in my contemplation of God's creation, I found it difficult to imagine the Creator prior to the heavens and earth. While we trust that He knew us before the foundations of the earth were formed (Ephesians 1:4), perhaps you also try to reckon the image of God when there is no heaven, no earth, and no man to reflect that image. Who was He then? What did He look like? How could He be described when there was no work of His hands to show His existence?

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made."* **John 1:1-3**

*"Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."* **I Timothy 1:17**

Before there were men to reflect His image, He was. Before there were birds to fly unto every corner of the sky, He was. Before the sun and the moon were set in place to light the earth, He was. Before any seed was planted, He was. Before the land appeared and the waters came together, He was. Before the heavens were stretched in the firmament, He was. Before the first light, He was. "Look unto the heavens, and see; and behold the clouds which are higher than thou" (Job 35:5). In the beginning were wisdom and understanding. In the beginning, He was thinking of you.

## **THE STORM** (Proverbs 3:20)

*"By His knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew."*

### **Proverbs 3:20**

With a deep sense of anguish and a few remaining tears, I pulled out of a gas station on the southern edge of Salem in December 1998 to the falling of Pacific rains and roaring thunder. Every possession filled the cubicle of my little car as I found myself desperately clinging to the words of Philippians 3:13 with the hope of a new day. As a young man enduring his own tragic love story, it seemed the southbound pools of Interstate 5 would be my undoing. Waters from this Oregon weather crashed against my windows with each passing truck and I was fearful that the rain would never end. Going through such a personal and physical storm on that wet night, there were moments when I was sure the Lord would take me home. But the heavens were not mine to control.

The children of our Sunday school class were recently challenged to imagine the story of Noah with a new consideration. Certainly we know God's declaration of destruction (Genesis 6:13) and the command to build an ark (Genesis 6:14), but what of the moment when he entered the boat and made eye contact with his wife and three sons (Genesis 7:7)? Upon closing the door to the great ark, these eight precious human beings had seven days of unknown discussion before the first raindrop fell (Genesis 7:10). Did they weep on behalf of those who were left behind? Did they express fear of the future? My own tale of sorrow is so vastly pale in comparison to what these men and women must have experienced during that final week. And then the waters came.

"In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened" (Genesis 7:11). The storm of the ages began and the people upon whose grace God had extended were forced to endure an unprecedented flood from the heavens above and the earth below. Most of us have been taught to view this story with regard to a single water source, rather than the two that God had created from above and below the heavens (Genesis 1:6-8). In other words, Noah's flood was not simply a lot of rain, but a combination of showers with an unplugged drain below the earth that began to rise. Every inch of this storm was calculated from the beginning.

The Book of Job reminds us that there is only One who has ultimate control over the storm. He "hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters" and "a way for the lightning of thunder; to cause it to rain on the earth" (Job 38:25-26a). Surely there is not a man who can "lift up his voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover" or "send lightnings, that they may go" (Job 38:34-35a). Only "by His knowledge the depths are broken up" and only by His knowledge do the "clouds drop down the dew."

From inside the walls of the ark, Noah and his family could hear the storm and feel the weight of its wind. From outside those walls, our Almighty God had measured every drop, filled every valley, and numbered every day. By design, the waters above and the waters below would enclose the earth and give birth to a fresh start. Solomon reminds his readers that by the knowledge of God, there are no accidents and there are no mistakes. Every storm has a final hour and every night has a rising sun. Whatever you must endure in this life of tears and trouble, His grace will carry you through to the promise of a new day (Genesis 6:8).



## THE SON OF A KING

(Proverbs 3:21-23)

*"My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: Keep sound wisdom and discretion: So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble."* **Proverbs 3:21-23**

For the seventh time in just three chapters, Solomon begins a proverb with this focused call to his son. Those who remember the "super" combination of Christopher Reeve with the voice of Marlon Brando may find themselves hearing the echoes of "my son" as every viewer knew... the gifted child would now become the heroic man. Others may giggle at the mention of Sean Connery grabbing the arm of Harrison Ford with a gentle whisper that said, "Indiana." Whether we see it on the big screen, read it in a book, or know it by experience, a son should always recognize his father's voice.

By order, the first six calls can be summed up as follows: (1) Hear me (1:8); (2) Ignore the enticement of the sinner (1:10); (3) Walk not in the ways of the world (1:12); (4) Receive my words and hide them deep inside (2:1); (5) Forget not what you have been taught (3:1); (6) Welcome the discipline and correction of God, for such is the manner of your earthly father (3:11). Periodically, the point must be made that while there is ageless wisdom throughout the text of this book, we ought not randomly assert that these father-to-son instructions can or should always be applied. Remember, the entire Kingdom of Israel is in the hands of a king who has done "evil in the sight of the Lord" (I Kings 11:6), but who still, like any good father, intends to pass along his most precious gift to the eldest son. That gift is wisdom. And wisdom, while it exists for all those who know the Lord, will never require the same actions of every man.

To a casual reader, Verse 21 seems to fall out of place with the preceding text. Certainly we would not assume that Solomon is asking his son to maintain the clouds or the depths of the sea and yet the reference is made that he should "let not them depart from thine eyes." For this, we have to rub our pupils ever so slightly to see that "them" refers back to Verse 3. In other words, let not "mercy and truth" depart from thine eyes. He that walks with his eyes forward will have "sound wisdom and discretion."

Underneath discretion is the concept of being discreet, or having good active judgment with words. Some are quick to condemn the fool and slander the liar as they praise their own righteousness. Sadly, this is not wisdom and neither could it ever be. For if "mercy and truth" are the central focus of a man's walk, then his "soul" will be full of "life" rather than death and his neck will be wrapped in "grace" rather than disapproval. He who learns only to walk with his mind and not his heart will crush the very people that he was sent to serve. He who learns to operate his heart on the basis of a sound mind will strengthen the people of God.

Perhaps no other natural father in the expanse of Scripture can be said to desire the security of his son more than Solomon. For this, we compare Proverbs 3:23 with an earlier verse: "But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil" (1:33). Alas, the desire of this father is the safety of his kingdom for years to come through the preservation of wisdom in the coming generation. "And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon" (I Kings 4:25). This, the expectation of a king's son.

## **SWEET SLEEP** (Proverbs 3:24)

*"When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: Yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet."* **Proverbs 3:24**

Several days before sitting down to chew on this proverb, a familiar face approached me on Sunday morning and slipped me a business-sized card along with his handshake. In just a few words, the insight was simple. "Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones. And when you have finished your daily tasks, go to sleep in peace – God is awake." Indeed, we can rest with a confidence that our God is not on vacation from the needs of His Body.

If a book like Proverbs were not so full of curious riddles, one might easily glance over this verse noting only that a man who is afraid will sleep worse than a man who has nothing to fear. Even "the sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much" (Ecclesiastes 5:12). We've all worked hard and fallen fast asleep from our labors. We've all enjoyed the peaceful rest of a holiday without interruption. And to be sure, some might even admit that if allowed, they would prefer to sleep all day (while smiling at the words of Proverbs 20:13). To all who labor and all who live in peace, this verse is no more complex than pouring milk on cereal with the dawn of a new day. However, the deeper we get into the book, including this verse, the closer we come to the inner circle of a king and his message of preparation for the most important kingdom in Biblical history.

For what it's worth, my goal is not to overcomplicate the simple, but to remind readers of the previous verses and set the pretext for what is to come. Scripture speaks of "sweet sleep" only three times; in the aforementioned words of Ecclesiastes 5:12, Jeremiah 31:26, and our current verse. Jeremiah 31 is, for all intensive purposes, one of the most memorable chapters in all of Biblical prophecy. Only here do we find the most explicit reference to a "new covenant" established between "the house of Israel" and the "house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31). Just prior to saying, "Behold, the days come" when this new covenant will be made, the prophet has envisioned this terrifying "time of Jacob's trouble" with a foreknowledge of peace to follow (Jeremiah 30:7). Yet he says, "Upon this I awaked, and beheld; and my sleep was sweet unto me" (Jeremiah 31:26).

Sweet sleep always comes at the close of great labor. In the prophetic words of Jeremiah, that labor and "travail" would give birth to the "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:6; 31:8). With a similar tone in Proverbs, Solomon is tending to the future of his kingdom. Indeed, as we shall see in the coming verses, trouble and desolation are around the corner for the wicked, but the Lord God will preserve His children. It is for this reason that Jeremiah can awaken from troubled visions to say that he has had "sweet sleep" when it would appear that great sorrow should leave him restless.

In ages past, the Lord God calculated the measure of waters above and below that were necessary to flush the world of what angered Him. The storm raged for forty days and forty nights, but within the walls of a great boat, the Lord preserved Noah and his family for a new day ahead. In the end, even the ark rested from its labor (Genesis 8:4). The proverbial words of Solomon to the young Rehoboam are quite simple: Days of sorrow are coming, but fear not when "thou liest down;" sleep in peace, for God is awake.

## A HOUSE DIVIDED

(Proverbs 3:25-26)

*"Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. For the Lord shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken."*

### **Proverbs 3:25-26**

Historians are often wary of using the word "inevitable" because it might imply the possibility of a sure thing where life cannot always be predicted. These modern days have witnessed a presidential campaign where many of the remaining players were counted out by the experts. Baseball and football have frequently enjoyed the rise of unexpected underdogs who go on to defeat the "inevitable" champion. Perhaps the final cliché is that no detail of our human experience is fully over until it's over.

Scripture, however, does not hesitate on the matter of "inevitable" desolation. The ever-forgiving Father calls frequently on the nation of Israel to "turn from their wicked ways" so that he might heal their land (II Chronicles 7:14). "For among my people are found wicked men: they lay wait, as he that setteth snares; they set a trap, they catch men" (Jeremiah 5:26). Early on in the Book of Proverbs, we encountered the "wily" efforts of such sinners in the midst of Solomon's kingdom. These are the wicked who are "greedy of gain" and whose houses "inclineth unto death" (1:10-18; 2:18). They seek only to destroy the harmony of righteousness and face imminent destruction.

On June 16, 1858 in Springfield, Illinois, the future U.S. president foreshadowed the dangers of civil war. Channeling the Gospel of Matthew, Abraham Lincoln said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Two thousand years earlier, the original words came from Christ: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" (Matthew 12:25). This ought to give us a depth of understanding about how serious King Solomon was regarding the future of Israel. He stands on record as the last remaining king over a united kingdom. The tense of his proverbial wisdom suggested that he knew what was coming. One might even say he knew what was inevitable.

Many commentators, believing that they are doing justice to our need of modern application, have tended to view these verses as a reference to everyday tribulation. Needless to say, such teaching is nonsense. Over and over, Solomon attempts to establish his son according to the law of marital purity where he himself has fallen short. The Lord God of Israel declares through Mosaic Law that an improper alliance with foreign nations would "turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly" (Deuteronomy 7:1-4). Hence, the prevalent issue for King Solomon throughout the Book of Proverbs is the purity of his kingdom and the preservation of its union by the king.

Desolation is coming to the wicked of the kingdom, but if the king will walk in the steps of mercy and truth, the Lord will keep his "foot from being taken." If his walk is righteous, he has nothing to fear. The conditions of security for the nation of Israel were to be based on their proper conduct. No one is more responsible for the behavior of a kingdom than the king himself. It is now imperative by the lessons of his father that Rehoboam, the future King of Judah, the southern half of a divided house, learn the courage of godliness. For if he would live by these lessons, so would his kingdom.

## THE ECONOMY OF LABOR

(Proverbs 3:27-28)

*"Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it. Say not to thy neighbour, 'Go, and come again, and tomorrow I will give;' when thou hast it by thee." Proverbs 3:27-28*

Over the years, most of us have been impacted at one time or another to make decisions based on the images we see around us, but this is not always the case. Arguing against the notion that a picture is worth a thousand words, twentieth century author and poet, William Childress, said the following: "If you're not convinced, fall in a lake and start gulping water. Then, instead of screaming the word HELP, hold up a picture of yourself drowning. If someone pulls you out, I lose my argument." Perhaps Childress has a dour sense of humor, but his message captures the necessity of action. The most heart-breaking image of a starving child is worthless if those who see it do nothing.

The dynamics of those with power and those without it have changed little from the days of Solomon. In one sense, the very existence of a modern middle class has allowed our society to become even more patronizing to those in need. We grip tightly to our prosperity and tell the poor that we'll help them tomorrow. This endless cycle of unwilling provision has convinced many of us that we can freely decide who to help, when to help, and under what conditions we will help. At the same time, funding the poor is not always so black and white. What should be done with the idle and passive beggar who refuses to work if given the opportunity? In the case of a universal health care system, should our taxes fund the homeless at the same cost of our own survival?

For centuries, kings, queens, presidents and even dictators have tried to develop laws for the benefit of their weakest citizens. To date, few have ever witnessed a society absent of such concerns. The context of our passage in Proverbs tells every reader that when a man has given profitable labor to his kingdom, the king has a duty to pay what is owed. This is the price of national morale. For if men work without pay, then the nation is fed by the poor economics of slavery.

Much of the Old Testament serves as a tutor of wisdom from an age gone by. The Apostle Paul, speaking of similar expectations under a new dispensation, wrote: "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt" (Romans 4:4). In other words, for a man who works and gives of his labor, a debt is owed. Those who lived as citizens in this historic nation of Israel were to be rewarded for what they had done and punished for what they had not. For the future king to see a man's labor and not respond would teach the people that there was no point in continuing their efforts. Why would they work if they weren't going to receive anything for it?

Through the unexpected hands of time, our Lord Jesus Christ introduced a new economic system for His children. Rather than finding a reward through our endless labor, the tables have turned in this present dispensation. We are now rewarded simply for believing on He who "justifieth the ungodly," for such a man's faith "is counted for righteousness" (Romans 4:5). "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The economy of labor was necessary for the provisions of a kingdom. The economy of grace is necessary for the insufficient worth of our labor.

## **PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE**

(Proverbs 3:29-30)

*"Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee. Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm."* **Proverbs 3:29-30**

In the years that have followed a million tears from September 11, 2001, Americans have found themselves entangled in a web of complex debates about the intangible enemy of terror. While there are those who have gained momentum with the idea of conservative caution, many others support the unspoken ideal that every suspected "harboring nation" is guilty until proven innocent. Only this morning did my eyes catch an article polling readers as to whether they were willing to support the death penalty for six "suspects" involved in the events of 2001. At the time of my viewing, seventy-five percent were in favor of taking the life of those who had not yet endured a fair trial outside the walls of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Solomon, no doubt, had it mind to caution his son about the abuses of waging war too quickly or presuming that every "neighboring" country was, by their very existence of disagreeable faith, an enemy of Israel. The discretion of a young king was to be built on the godly principles of mercy and truth, rather than malice and presumption. In other words, a neighboring country "dwelling securely by thee" should have no concern for the malicious blueprints of a nearby king.

Often, students of Scripture find it easy to pass off the word "evil" as a means of outrageous immorality when, in fact, "evil" is often defined by that which is harmful to another. The words, "devise not evil against thy neighbor," is not referring to explicit sin, but instead, to pre-emptive ruin and abuse. To "devise evil" against a secure neighbor is to set up plans for that neighbor's ruin based solely on the conclusions of the deviser.

*"Do they not err that devise evil? but mercy and truth shall be to them that devise good."* **Proverbs 14:22**

Just recently, a man who lives in our building came knocking on our front door with two packages that had gone missing the previous month. Days before, my wife and I were quite sure that the post office had made an error, but had no idea about the location of that mistake. We found ourselves wondering whether their had been malicious intent on the part of a neighbor who wrongly accepted what did not belong to them. Not knowing with confidence that any wrong had been done, we counted both boxes as a loss and set the matter aside. With an apology for taking so long to make contact, any notion of misconduct was removed by his friendly handshake. Had we begun pounding doors in anger or storming every unknown living room with impatience, the obvious error would have been ours.

Solomon's foreign policy was simple: "Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm." The Lord Jesus would take this message further in the coming years of Roman rule over Israel: "And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other;" (Luke 6:29). With the exception of wars to regain the promised land of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:6-7), God had called Israel to peace. Such was the long-term expectation of a holy nation.

## POLITICS OF ENVY

(Proverbs 3:31)

*"Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways."* **Proverbs 3:31**

Embracing an opportunity to travel overseas, Alexis de Tocqueville took advantage of his position in the French court to visit the United States during the 1830s. His agenda was quite simple. He wanted to understand why the American Revolution achieved long-term success while the French Revolution had not. Tocqueville was deeply fascinated with a growing democracy abroad and hoped to study a system that was quite different than his own. Upon return to France, he wrote two volumes appropriately titled, *Democracy in America*. The New York Times was noted for saying that "no better study of a nation's institutions and culture has ever been written by a foreign observer."

In truth, when Christians delve into the pages of Old Testament history, the vast majority are foreigners to the laws, systems, and politics of Israel. Believing that none of this matters, critics of the dispensational approach to Scripture often take verses at random without any concern for who they were written. Without question, there are immense and deeply penetrating lessons that the Body can learn from the tutor of Israel's past, but it is absolutely essential to basic Biblical comprehension that we know how one system differs from another. Tocqueville spent nine months studying the American people with an understanding that their system was quite different from his own.

Basing our studies on the most sound principles of right division (II Timothy 2:15), we must, by now, recognize that the administrative structure of Israel is not the administrative structure for the Body of Christ. At this point in the Book of Proverbs, it should be quite evident that King Solomon was, in a wonderfully mysterious fashion, setting the law of succession for the human leader of God's people in Israel. His young son, Rehoboam, would be given the guidelines for a monarchy that could either lead the kingdom into a prosperous future or derail them into a period of civil conflict and ultimate desolation.

With this particular proverb, like many others, Solomon expounds upon the Mosaic law of human relations. "Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21; 23:9). Careful readers of Proverbs 3:31 might notice that the implication seems less national and more individually grounded. However, we mustn't forget that there is no citizen of Israel greater than the king and the only person capable of actually oppressing the crown is the head of another nation. If Rehoboam was to "choose" the way of his enemies, then "the prince that wanteth understanding" would himself become the "great oppressor" to the nations around (Proverbs 28:16). Under such a government, Israel would always be seen as a threat and peace could hardly be secured.

Perhaps the lasting question can be asked: Why would anyone "envy" the ways of their oppressor? Surely the oppressed would not wish to be the oppressor, right? Not necessarily. Every athlete who has experienced crushing defeat at the hands of a superior rival can admit that they would revel in their own moment of victory. When you turn the tables of human government, the politics of envy are no different. Solomon warns his son against the dangers of turning from the oppressed to the oppressor. Again, such was the long-term expectation of a holy nation.

## PRELUDE TO ABOMINATION

(Proverbs 3:32)

*"For the froward is abomination to the Lord: But his secret is with the righteous."*

### **Proverbs 3:32**

Between 1978 and 1982, the infamous character of Dr. David Banner and his inner rage came to life on television screens across America. Although it was one of my favorite t.v. shows as a child, I still recall running out of the room every time Banner's eyes turned green. It wasn't as scary to see the actual monster as it was to see the man go from peaceful to evil within a matter of seconds. According to Marvel Comics (creators of *The Incredible Hulk*), a more terrifying creature was written into the series in the late 1960s. This new character was called The Abomination. Both he and the original Hulk were compelled throughout the story to find a way of controlling their "raging spirit within."

For many of us, the word "abomination" has an immediate context. More often than not, both dispensational and covenant theologians refer to the "abomination of desolation" that Christ speaks of in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14. Both verses refer back to Daniel 11:31 and 12:11 when the famous prophet talks about the coming "time of Jacob's trouble." In layman's terms, this is known as the Great Tribulation, and has to do with a prophesied crisis in the land of Israel.

However, not every reference to "abomination" is a prophetic implication of troubled times. In fact, more often than not, the word "abomination" is simply a reference to any dishonorable action in the eyes of another person or persons. And much to the surprise of faithful Bible students, this word is used more in Proverbs (19x) than any of the other 66 books and has little to do with prophecy. Rather, this book of wisdom uses "abomination" to explain "seven" things God considers to be utterly shameful.

*"These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: (1) A proud look, (2) a lying tongue, (3) and hands that shed innocent blood, (4) an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, (5) feet that be swift in running into mischief, (6) a false witness that speaketh lies, (7) and he that soweth discord among the brethren."* **Proverbs 6:16-19**

The passage of our lesson (3:32) is merely a prelude to this list of hated abominations before the eyes of God. Our studies brought us to the brink of the froward man (2:12-15) and it was discovered that Solomon was speaking about the man inside who turns his back on the forward path. To be "froward" is to be the opposite of "forward" and thus implies a man who is moving in a backwards direction. Hence, for the "froward" to be "abomination to the Lord" is a preliminary explanation for what exactly God hates to see within His people.

Such a man who walks with his back to the light of the lamp (Psalm 119:105) is a man whose "secret is with the righteous." In other words, Solomon is teaching that there are those who carelessly live by these seven abominations, but the righteous will always recognize a wolf "secretly" disguised in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). Speaking of those who disregard the "doctrine" of "godliness," the Apostle Paul warns against similar types of dissenters among the Body of Christ (I Timothy 6:3-6). Whether it be Israel or the Body, this point of ageless wisdom remains: God hates the proud and lifts up the humble. May our righteousness in Christ Jesus never be taken for granted lest we become prideful of what we did not earn.

## TWO HOUSES (Proverbs 3:33)

*"The curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked: But He blesseth the habitation of the just."* **Proverbs 3:33**

During a recent evening of late night reading, I was distracted by the sound of crashing flower pots and the voice of a woman screaming profanity outside. For whatever reason, an inside conversation had spilled out into the hearing distance of neighbors and children trying to sleep in the nearby apartments. After calling the police (who arrived within seconds), I peered out the blinds to see a man being handcuffed on the sidewalk. Over the course of an hour, his hands were released and the officers apprehended the woman in his place. As it turned out, she had thrown the crashing pot at his head and caused a significant gash above his ear. When the dust finally settled and all was at peace around our building, I wandered back into my quiet study and noted how different life must really be from one house to another.

Much like the previous message on abomination, Solomon contrasts the house of the just with the house of the wicked far more than any other Biblical author (10:6, 7; 10:20; 12:13; 12:21; 17:15; 24:16; 29:27). And although the lesson of this particular proverb is fair and reasonable, the wise king is quick to share a far more disturbing reality in the Book of Ecclesiastes: *"All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness."*

### **Ecclesiastes 7:15**

This is almost the exact reverse of what we read in Proverbs 3:33, wherein the just man gets his blessing for being just while the wicked man receives his curse for being wicked. According to the words of vanity, the righteous man may die earlier than the wicked man who somehow manages to extend his life. How are these to be reconciled if indeed we trust the Word of God as a source of consistency over contradiction? How can it be that one man gets everything he doesn't deserve while the other man achieves nothing that he did deserve?

The Apostle Paul guides his Corinthian readers through the tutelage of historic Israel in order to explain such a distinction. *"But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty"* (I Corinthians 1:27). Truth is, when we think we've nailed down the basics of human logic, both Scripture and experience teach us that our wisdom is foolishness before God who sets forth every mysterious puzzle.

While establishing the Mosaic Law in the Book of Deuteronomy, God consistently promised that He would "bless" Israel in their labor (14:29; 15:10,18; 23:20; 24:19; 28:12), in their lands (15:4; 28:8; 30:16), and with their increase (16:15). They who upheld the "just" laws of righteousness in the nation would enjoy physical blessing for their obedience. Although it would be nice to imagine these blessings within our own "houses" and "habitations," the promise of such prosperity is not ours to steal. Likewise, it would be foolish to declare our own righteousness in the hope of earthly gain. *"Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*

### **Philippians 4:6-7**

We, as members of the Body of Christ, have nothing of necessity beyond the cross of Calvary. In other words, we have no just cause for demanding anything more than the price that was paid for our salvation. The Lord God gave back to Israel what He promised them for their efforts in the land. If they worked according to the law, they were to be blessed according to the same law. We, however, have the full assurance of a heavenly blessing without the requirement of our human labor. Only by His grace are we blessed, my friends, only by His grace.



**GRACE TO THE LOWLY**  
(Proverbs 3:34)

*"Surely He scorneth the scorners: But he giveth grace unto the lowly."* **Proverbs 3:34**

Across the highest peaks of the *Chaine de la Selle* mountain range to the sands of Atlantic waters, shouts of independence echoed for the second time in the western hemisphere. Men once bound with the chains of slavery wept in the streets of freedom on New Year's Day of 1804 sharing a common hope that someone, somewhere would lend them a hand in their greatest moment of need. For it was not enough to merely know that they were independent if the trading nations of the world rejected their declaration. They were indeed a free people, but without the sovereign grace of their racially-divided neighbor to the north, the families of Haiti would face a terrifying future of neglected genocide.

Theological debates afford us the unspoken privilege of defining grace as "unmerited favor" because we know that God's gift of salvation to us came through no efforts of our own (Ephesians 2:8-9). Our human condition, however, has yet to learn the practical application of such truth. After leading thirteen colonies to the climax of their own declaration in 1776, President Thomas Jefferson was now in a position to either support or ignore the predominantly black republic in the Central American islands south of the United States. With the support of Congressional slave owners, he signed a law prohibiting all trade with Haiti and thus ensured the death warrant of thousands upon thousands who would never be recognized as free.

Within the pit of our stomachs, few of us are willing to admit when we have failed to show the grace we were given. Fortunately for those who have witnessed our arrogance, God Himself is still gracious. And as we read Solomon's words above, we can see that grace was always the Lord's to give among those who did not appear deserving. In fact, the ageless and eternal love of God would seem to turn the tables on those who "scorn" (mock) the "lowly" (poor). After years of unspeakable poverty, Haitians tell the volume of their lives in the following proverb: *Bay kou bliye, pote mak sonje*, which translates, "Those who give the blows forget: those who bear the scars remember." (1)

King Solomon uses this verse both practically and prophetically to teach his son, who is far from "lowly," about the character of God's mercy upon weaker vessels of the earth who have been rejected by the haughtiness of the self-righteous scoffer. Indeed, for those who have been needlessly condemned by the standards of human merit, vengeance is His to take upon the scorner (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30). From the angle of prophecy, this passage becomes an assurance and reminder to the future king about the way God would deal with men from the lowliest condition to the highest royalty.

At the core of God's love, both in ages past and ages present, we find a body of broken people who need what only His sovereign grace can provide: a freedom that extends beyond mere words. For it is not enough to simply loosen the chains of a slave if he knows not who he is, where he is from, or where he is going. True grace does more than talk about its own favor. True grace gives men a family, a hope, and a future. Ours are the feet that were intended to bring this message and live by its eternal application.

(1) Robinson, Randall. 2007. *An Unbroken Agony*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 27.

## THE FAME OF SHAME

(Proverbs 3:35)

*"The wise shall inherit glory: But shame shall be the promotion of fools."* **Proverbs 3:35**

Three days before my wife and I got married in June of 2002, the biggest stage of unknown talent was unleashed throughout the United States. *American Idol* debuted with little fanfare, but quickly burst into an unexpected phenomenon that has since been known to produce three or more memorable musicians each season (regardless of the finale). Before any significant musical ability is discovered, each year begins with a myriad of absurd singers with little or no vocal strength. Among these contenders, the vast majority find themselves relishing in "five minutes of fame" at the expense of looking ridiculous in front of an audience of millions. At the other end of the spectrum, most who go on to achieve great success begin their journey with very little confidence. Viewers, like my wife and I, have long found that some of our favorite singers are those who "face the music" of critical judgment with the greatest humility.

Perhaps most remarkable about this wave of pop culture icons and one-hit-wonders is that far too many in the world are willing to be "remembered" as famous even if that fame has no substance. The goal, of course, is to be recognized for something. Anything. Give a man a soapbox with nothing to say in front of an audience of ten thousand and the fool will make up the first thing that pops into his head. Will he be remembered? Perhaps. Will it matter? Not remotely.

Most who read through the Book of Proverbs are deeply familiar with Solomon's use of contrastive parallelism. Scholars have noted that the last four verses of Chapter Three offer the first glimpse at the king's style in defining such opposite extremes: the Froward vs the Righteous (v.32), the Wicked vs the Just (v.33), the Scornor vs the Lowly (v.34), and the Wise vs the Fool (v.35). The last two are connected in the following passage: "*When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom*" (Proverbs 11:2).

Wisdom finds itself most evident among the lowly... among those who think nothing of themselves and yet hold the keys of understanding in the palm of their admittedly weak hands. With pride cometh contention (Proverbs 13:10), destruction (Proverbs 16:18), and shame. Those who think they are something prove to have nothing and those who know they are nothing find themselves have everything.

We who are destined to a hope of heavenly glory with the appearance of Christ (Colossians 3:2-4) are also set apart to admit that we are weak without Christ (II Corinthians 12:9-11). According to I Corinthians 4:7-10, we are presently a "spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men." If we had achieved this promotional spectacle by our own doing, it would be to our shame. Since the eyes of creation are upon us by the work of Christ rather than our own labor, let us heed the lesson of Romans 12:16... "*Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits*" (Romans 12:16).

## **BOX OF CHOCOLATES**

(Proverbs 3: Review)

Quite possibly, the very mention of chocolate leaves your mouth watering for something that may or may not be in your nearby cupboard. Depending on the time of year, most of us are given the occasional privilege to stick our hands into a box of chocolates in order to taste the pure joys of sweet candy. Certain pieces put a flavored shell over the nuts and fruits that we would never touch otherwise. More often than not, we've all studied the interior placement of these candies so as to avoid certain chocolates that are not to our liking. Some of us are more self-controlled than others, but with each bite, we're given a chance to take momentary pleasure in something that seems more than worth the experience.

Part of the joy found in the Book of Proverbs is the very nature of knowing that wisdom, in its most bare form, is a transcendent part of Scripture that all believers in all ages can taste. Yet, as we survey the contents available for our study while living in the present age of grace, our obligation under the principle of "right division" (II Timothy 2:15) forces us to recognize where and when the kingly author's message ceases to be transcendent. In other words, wisdom is wisdom regardless of its place in time, but captured within specific moments of history, wisdom has a centralized purpose that modern readers must understand apart from themselves or their longing to find personal attachment within the Word of God. The third chapter of Proverbs can, at times, seem like an oddly ordered pattern of both transcendent wisdom and age-sensitive wisdom. Below is, perhaps, a reasonable guide for understanding that unique order.

Solomon extends the message of chapter two by emphasizing that the path of mercy and truth ought never be forgotten or forsaken (3:1-4) and that the source of this foundation [mercy and truth] is not of human wisdom, but rather, stems from a heavenly Father figure (3:5-12). Much as he did in the Proverbs 2:4, the king reminds his reader that the alternative to human wisdom far surpasses any tangible merchandise such as silver, gold, or rubies (3:13-15), for within the gift of God's wisdom are life, honor, true pleasure, peace, and happiness (3:16-18). No man's wisdom can compete with He who established the heavens and the earth (3:19-20).

The age-sensitive material of this third chapter begins in verse 21 with an almost constitutional preparation for the future government of the king's son. If, in fact, the future king will bind the words of wisdom and the lessons of grace about his neck, then his kingdom will be a place of safety and righteousness (3:21-24). On the other hand, in a rather prophetic fashion, the son is warned of domestic concerns within Israel (3:25-26) as well as foreign concerns among those who are perceived as oppressors (3:29-31). As he turns back to the theme of righteous leadership, Solomon writes four remaining proverbs that introduce a prelude to the seven abominations of Proverbs 6:16-19 (3:32-35).

Kingdom or no kingdom, the ultimate path upon which all men of God are asked to walk, both then and now, demands attention to the spirit of wisdom (Ephesians 1:17). Wisdom always leans us forward, but the most memorable passage of the chapter issues a warning against leaning to the left or right upon our own understanding (3:5-6). May we begin to discover that it is not merely salvation that was given us as a gift, but everything we know of Him to be true. For if we come to believe that we know what we know by our own merits of investment and study, then the abomination of our pride will never acknowledge the Creator and Director of our path.

## MY FATHER'S SON

(Proverbs 4:1-4)

*"Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding. For I give you good doctrine, forsake ye not my law. For I was my father's son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live."* **Proverbs 4:1-4**

On the morning of their first wedding anniversary, my mother and father received the early arrival of their firstborn son. With both parents buried in college coursework and church ministry, my early years offer plenty of fond memories of two people who loved the Lord and hoped that I would do the same. The foremost reason that this man and this woman had first fallen in love was grounded in musical talent. She was a star pianist who had been playing flawlessly "by ear" since she was just a little girl. My father was preparing for a PhD in music and could, it seemed, play any instrument that was put in front of him. The vast majority of what my father did was to write the music of his heart in the form of orchestration, choral arrangements, or worship choruses.

As the years went by, my association with these two parents brought about the logical questions from among those who saw me. So what is your musical talent, Jeremy? Do you play the piano? Do you sing? With all this talent in your family, you must do something musical, right? The association was that if I was my father's son, then the gift of music must have been passed down. To be sure, I became inundated enough with the world of music to know a fair amount, but the legacy of music would not continue with me. You see, my father had followed in his own father's footsteps as a musician across the Canadian border. He was struck with a heavy blow when I spoke later in life about the exhaustion of being associated with his talents at the expense of my own individuality. My father had always been proud to be his father's son. It took several more years before I would recognize that being my father's son was not about sharing his talents. Rather, it was about living the example of his tireless labor in Christ.

Most of us carry a certain weight of expectation to be the representatives of those who brought us into this world. In the case of our proverbial author, he has a fascinating connection to one of the most beloved characters in all of the Old Testament. Solomon's older sibling died seven days after birth as a punishment for the murder and consummated adultery of King David and Bathsheba (II Samuel 12:13-23). Almost immediately after the loss of their child, Solomon is conceived as a replacement blessing in the loving eyes of God (II Samuel 12:24). Thus, the son and future king was born into a situation of tremendous heartache. He would be "his father's son" by name, but he would also be "tender and only beloved" in the sight of his mother after her great loss. Even after being crowned king, Solomon would still find himself bowing before his mother out of respect for her rightful place above him in love (I Kings 2:19).

Out of the family he was born, the author of Proverbs makes his heritage a point of undeniable authority. If, indeed, he is his "father's son," then the "children" of Israel must see that all instruction should be heard, all knowledge should be attended, all doctrine should be sound, no law should be forsaken, every commandment should be kept, and the words of life should be retained deep in the heart. This would be the legacy of wisdom from David to Solomon for the Nation of Israel.

## WITH ALL THY GETTING

(Proverbs 4:5-7)

*"Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all they getting get understanding."* **Proverbs 4:5-7**

En route to the ceremony of my high school graduation, my mother sat almost frozen without words in the front seat. My father was rather stoic until mom's voice broke the silence. "I'm not sure why we're doing this. You haven't earned it." And with that, any hope of walking across the stage undaunted suddenly evaporated. She was right, however. For in the moment that we arrived, I darted across the field to find a geography teacher whose final grade would determine whether I would receive my diploma. Looking down at the boy who had barely given any effort in his classroom, he hesitated for a moment before letting me know that my grade was just above the necessary mark required for achievement. There, in that shameful moment, I had proved my mother's words. This was not about doing my best, it was about a smart kid who proved himself willing to forsake the value of an education. And she knew it.

Since that walk of dishonorable merit years ago, my path has brought me into the company of several well-meaning men and women who themselves have devalued the need for an education. Many accomplished tradesmen look back upon successes that they achieved without any time in the classroom and thus poke fun of any who choose to endure the books and the curriculum of mental development. Rarely is the reverse true. For within the eyes of an honorable student, the life and labors of a tradesman is spoken of with the utmost regard. Where, then, is the divide between the student who praises the tradesman and the tradesman who disregards the student? They are divided between arguments of action over knowledge. To the one, knowledge empowers further action. To the other, action deflates the need for any knowledge. Neither are entirely accurate.

The oft mentioned prophet, Daniel, was among a group of young Hebrew children who were "skillful in all wisdom, cunning in knowledge, understanding science, and such as had ability" to learn languages beyond their own (Daniel 1:4). Daniel was not simply a young man who knew the action of faithfulness, but he was well educated to the profit (no pun intended) of those he would gradually encounter in his later life. And although he exhibited remarkable wisdom on health (Daniel 1:8-16), interpretation of dreams (Daniel 2:16), and governmental leadership (Daniel 2:48-49), all of his understanding was credited to God (Daniel 1:17).

These three verses of Solomon have a curious arch. When anyone truly "gets" wisdom and understanding, and when they remember, keep, and love what they have received, then wisdom herself gives more. For if she has not been forsaken or ignored, then she will preserve her recipients by giving them an even greater understanding. If wisdom is recognized as the "principal" (foremost) foundation of true knowledge, then all other attributes can and will be enhanced. If, on the other hand, wisdom and those who seek after her are mocked, then little will be accomplished. Let he who labors get to laboring. Let he who studies get to studying. And "with all thy getting" may we truly "get" the understanding that allows us to minister to the cause of God's grace together.

## HONORABLE PROMOTION

(Proverbs 4:8)

*"Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honor, when thou dost embrace her."* **Proverbs 4:8**

Near the turn of the century in 1600, the highly regarded dramatist William Shakespeare completed the second Act of his pastoral comedy, *As You Like It*. After returning home from a key victory in the story, heroic Orlando encounters an old and faithful servant who tells him that being home is no longer a safe option. The old man offers Orlando his unflattering life-savings to elude any would-be captors and take to the road. Touched by the sentiment, the hero says, "O, good old man; how well in thee appears the constant service of the antique world, when service sweat for duty, not for meed [reward]! Thou art not for the fashion of these times, where none will sweat but for promotion." Orlando recognized that it was a rare thing for a man to give of himself if it meant absolutely nothing for him in return.

One of the most common questions we hear at work is, "What do you do when you're not here?" In other words, what do you do for fun? The implication, of course, is that the only time someone would work is if they're getting paid for it. Hence, in our spare time, it seems almost a given that the answer would be anything from golf, fishing, surfing, jogging and swimming to video games and movies. Comedian Steven Wright is known for the one liner: "In my spare time, I like to waste time." The ultimate joke is that the moment we are not required to do anything, we'll do absolutely nothing. Our spare time, therefore, is wasted time.

Perhaps the most unfortunate conclusion we often draw about each other is based on what we cannot see. We assume that if a student is no longer in class, they must be watching movies. If an employee is no longer at work, they must be sleeping. If our boss is not around on a given day, he or she must be out playing golf. But what of the possibility that a man or woman has given of their spare time to the quiet reading and study of Scripture? What of they who lose sleep serving a ministry where no one is witness? What of the woman who takes her Friday evening to touch the life of a dying friend for the gospel? These "spare" moments are often far more powerful than any that are witnessed in the public eye.

Among the wisest people that we know in our lives (by that I do not mean the most knowledgeable), there tends to be a pattern of quiet humility. The wise man is not quick to speak, nor is he eager to be regarded. He knows that he has found wisdom, but will never acknowledge such a fact publically or he may well lose the "promotion" that wisdom provided. These men and women of wisdom that we encounter are far more private people than we wish them to be, but they have found a most worthy secret.

When no one is looking...when the last visible worker has gone home... when spare time is every man's vanity... this is when the wise become wiser. For it is in the absence of the public eye that these individuals exalt wisdom to embrace her. They do not need the promotion of men who praise them, for they have found the honorable promotion of God who humbles them.

## THE CROWN (Proverbs 4:9)

*"She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee."* **Proverbs 4:9**

Almost a century before Kathy Bates won an Academy Award for her role opposite James Caan in the 1990 film *Misery*, another woman by the same name achieved tremendous recognition for her work in writing American poetry. Katherine Lee Bates is most remembered for penning the patriotic chorus: "America! America! God shed His *grace* on thee, And *crown* thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea!" These words were written soon after (and perhaps during) her cross country visit from Massachusetts to Colorado in 1893.

For any who have traveled the expanse of this mammoth nation, it's hard to avoid being touched by the splendid beaches of Cape Cod, the white snows of Rochester, or the quiet winds of Nebraska. Whether it be the roaring rapids of the Mississippi, the expansive deserts of Arizona, or the Rocky Mountains that stretch 3,000 miles from New Mexico even into the northernmost parts of British Columbia, all of God's creation has a glorious design. None of these attributes are of man's doing, but they all vary with such incredible distinction that each isolated region deserves the recognition of God's wonderful grace (surely the canyons and oceans never asked for their incredible beauty). Though this may not be the grace we're all so academically and personally familiar, it is grace nonetheless.

Perhaps most interesting about this small verse from Proverbs is that Solomon, like Bates in 1893, puts grace in the same context as a crown. Grace, as we understand it, always has to do with God's gift of unmerited favor. A crown, on the other hand, is usually a gift achieved by great effort. And while one might acknowledge that the son of Solomon is going to receive his "royal" crown simply because of his place in the family, our author here is not talking about a son who receives his inevitable inheritance. Rather, this is about the children of Israel (4:1) knowing that there exists a balance between the gift of grace and the measure of a crown. For it is the latter that requires their labor, not the former.

Gospel artist, Michael English, may well be remembered for years to come after his vocal delivery of the following lyrics: "There's not a victory without a fight. There's not a sunrise without a night. There's not a purchase without a cost. There's not a crown without a cross." Only the idle man takes the gift of grace and refuses to fight through to the sunrise.

*"Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."*

### **I Corinthians 3:13-15**

*"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."* **Ephesians 2:8-10**

Both Solomon's son and the nation of Israel knew that they had the favor of God above all other nations. If, however, they were to become ignorant and lazy in God's favor, then the crown of glory would be in question. No one in Biblical history was ever given grace so they might just receive it and sit still. Every man under the grace of God is called to be active (Ephesians 4:1). Anything less is idle acceptance. We all await that glorious day of delivery, but today, grace demands our action, rather than our inaction. The crown awaits (II Timothy 4:6-8).

## OFF THE BENCH (Proverbs 4:10-11)

*"Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths." Proverbs 4:10-11*

On March 4, 2008, arguably one of the best quarterbacks in the history of the National Football League retired from the Green Bay Packers. Brett Favre followed his official retirement with an emotional news conference where he acknowledged in tears that although he could still play the game for three hours a week, the game itself required far more preparation than he could give anymore. "It's been a great career for me and it's over... as hard as it is for me to say that... I just don't think I can give anything else." Being the tough example that he was from Mississippi to Wisconsin, even those who didn't watch the game of football knew the name of Brett Favre.

With his departure came many who asked the ultimate question of the backup quarterback. In the shadow of a legend, the 24-year old Aaron Rodgers would appear to have no chance at the same success. But unlike other quarterbacks who get tossed behind center with no prior education, Rodgers became a backup in 2005 only to spend the last few years watching and studying a position that he would eventually inherit. His task would be just as important as his predecessor. If the team is to move forward with any possibility, the young replacement will have to get off the bench and play the game.

Much of Proverbs is written with a continued hope that the king's son will follow in the spoken example of his father. The passage above implies that if he has been "taught in the way of wisdom" and "led in the right paths," that it is the child's responsibility to put one foot in front of the other and get in the business of living. Modern parents can often be heard sharing the same hopeful expectation of their sons and daughters: "I've done all I can do for you. Now it's your turn."

Of course, the path itself is never quite so easy and readers of the Old Testament know that Solomon's *actual* son and future successor, Rehoboam, would spend the greater part of his days at war with Jeroboam over who should rule the whole of Israel (I Kings 15:6). In the end, a pattern of division split the nation into a northern and southern kingdom with kings in the north and kings in the south. As far as the Biblical story goes, the two halves of Israel would never again be united as one. And by many accounts, it could be said that the son failed to carry on the legacy of his father.

The Apostle Paul is, for the Body of Christ, a father-figure of sorts (I Corinthians 4:15) who has provided the manual of instruction and sound doctrine for how we can and should proceed in the current age of grace. He has laid the foundation of Jesus Christ for the Body (I Corinthians 3:10-11). And much like Solomon would have expected of his son in obedience, Paul shares a similar expectation of his audience. Knowing that "all Scripture" is profitable for our walk (II Timothy 3:16), it is our responsibility, therefore, to get off the bench and get on the field. Paul fought his fight. Now we must fight ours.



## THE STUMBLER

(Proverbs 4:12)

*"When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble."* **Proverbs 4:12**

During a long day of walking through the parks of Disney World several years ago, my mother-in-law noticed something rather goofy about my footsteps. It was a common occurrence that I would drag my feet and unknowingly point them inward with each step. Of course, this was news to me because after a long day's journey, no one could bother me with news of my imperfections. That was, until the time came that I tripped over my own feet and had to smile.

One of the funniest acts I've ever seen in stand-up comedy had to do with poking fun of this human tendency where we trip over ourselves and then look back as though the sidewalk had something to do with it. And we do this all the time. Some will look back, but others will just pick up the stride from their slip as though they were already planning to run forward. Either way, the pattern is quite simple. It's not our fault. We never want to admit that our steps caused the stumble, but are quick to look for anything else that might have influenced our awkward moment of imbalance.

Arguably the greatest and most notable "stumble" in all of Scripture came from Israel's rejection of Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit who followed. For it was after this great sin that Paul wrote, "Have they *stumbled* that they should fall? God forbid: but rather, through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles for to provoke them to jealousy" (Romans 11:11). The "stumble" of Israel opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles and ultimately, the dispensation of the grace of God wherein the blood of Christ now covers "all men" apart from national boundaries (I Timothy 2:4; 4:10).

Solomon, however, is giving a much simpler message than any we might find elsewhere in God's Word. While there may be additional things to unveil from this small verse, the king is speaking directly about the path of wisdom. He that walks in wisdom will walk with footsteps that are not crooked. And when his footsteps are "straitened," he will be able to run without stumbling. The subtlety of this message is that there is a race to be run and they who stumble are ultimately stumbling over their own crooked feet.

Almost everyone has experienced the "stumble" after a brisk walk along the street, but far more have experienced the "stumble" of walking over their own feet in the ministry of God's grace. Some of us have a habit of putting one of those feet in our mouths while bouncing on the other. Some of us never walk straight and blame others for always being crooked. In reality, another man's walk is not ours to dictate. Pay attention to your own footsteps so that "when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble."

*"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil."* **Ephesians 5:15-16**

*"I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air:"* **I Corinthians 9:26**

## THE LIFELINE

(Proverbs 4:13)

*"Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her, for she is thy life."* **Proverbs 4:13**

Before the men of Hampton Court gathered together to begin work on what would later be known as the King James Bible in 1611, a century of writers and language experts had paved the way of translation with their lives and their pens. Most popular among English Protestants was the Geneva Bible of 1560, under which King James Stuart himself had been raised. Their classic entry for Proverbs 4:13 reads as follows: *"Take holde of instruction, & leaue not: kepe her, for fhe is thy life."* Perhaps the most notable difference (other than the spelling) is that the word "fast" is absent from the text.

While pundits and proponents of textual criticism could make plenty of debates about this minor difference in translation, one thing to ask ourselves is whether there is actually a difference between merely "taking hold" of something or "taking fast hold" of that same object. Much of this discussion really begins and ends on the progress of an evolutionary language. By 1560, one of the difficulties of English by contrast to the well-known French of the day was that writers and linguists were still finding ways to show emphasis in English translation.

E.W. Bullinger notes in his Companion Bible that the entire underlying phrase for "take fast hold" is an emphatic Hebrew clause. In other words, if Solomon meant for their to be emphasis, so should any reader who looks at the same phrase today. Preaching from the Metropolitan Tabernacle of London in June of 1878, Charles Spurgeon began his sermon on this Proverb with the following point: "If to take hold is good, to take fast hold is better." Indeed, there is nothing incorrect about taking hold, but like a father who raises his voice, much more attention is to be paid by the expression, "take FAST hold."

No doubt some still ponder to themselves, "But why does it matter?" After all, if the theme is ultimately that Solomon's audience should take hold of instruction and "let her not go," wouldn't they still get the message with or without "fast" included? In short, the answer is yes. At length, the answer is no. Consider the following example.

Quite frequently, when I've failed to hear the blaring of an alarm clock, my wife will gently whisper my name and I wake to the sound of her sweet voice. On the other hand, when my mind is lost in a thought and I've failed to notice a red light that I'm about to pass through, my wife's voice is no longer gentle. In a moment of severity, there's a big difference between someone saying "stop" and someone shouting, "STOP!" Solomon does not write with passive intent. He writes as though his audience is hanging from the side of a cliff with only a rope to hold. Hence, the king does not merely say, "take hold" of that line, but "take FAST hold" of it.

In reality, our daily walk follows a dangerous path of constant distractions. We're tempted to sin, we're pushed to lose faith, and we're weakened to give up. Looking forward, we can see that the righteous path is guided by wisdom. Therefore, "take fast hold" of the instruction she provides, keep her close at hand, and never let her go. For if wisdom is the lifeline that keeps men from danger, it won't hurt to emphasize the grip.

**FLEE, FLEE, FLEE**  
(Proverbs 4:14-15)

*"Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away."* **Proverbs 4:14-15**

Along the dirt road of a Salem drive in 1997, the lights of my car caught the shimmering reflection of a passing animal. As though time stood still for just a moment, I caught the eyes of an unexpected cat. And like all similar situations, the cat offered a "deer in the headlights" expression. It was as if we were sharing an immediate understanding that this was the end of the line for one of us. Either he was going to get hit or I was going to swerve into a tree. Though a long battle with allergies has made me quite unsympathetic to cat lovers, the moment still managed to break my heart. Looking back through the rear view mirror, this image of a tragic accident brought a lump to my throat and a stain to my memory.

Many of us have shared in similar tragedies. Given just a few extra seconds to avoid any disaster, most of us would stop our cars when possible and shout, "Get out of the road!" We're not intentionally violent and yet sudden experiences give us little choice. The wish, of course, is that any animal foolishly walking into the road would know to instinctively run the other direction when traffic comes through.

Soon after learning the Biblical principles of II Timothy 2:15, my attention was drawn to a word that seemed to jump off the page later in the same chapter. Paul wrote to the young minister that he should "flee" his youthful lusts (II Timothy 2:22). The reason this word fascinated me was because it was, perhaps, an extreme expectation. How does a man flee his temptations unless he, quite literally, runs from them in the opposite direction? It seemed Paul was saying that Timothy should get as far from the path of unrighteousness as he possibly could. Looking even more closely at the passage, we find Paul asking him to "shun" profane babblings (2:16), to "purge" himself of ungodly things (2:21), to "flee" youthful lusts (2:22), and to "avoid" foolish and unlearned questions (2:23). To shun. To purge one's self. To flee. To avoid. These instructions were jumping off the page.

Truth be told, we simply cannot find a point in Scripture where sinful lifestyles are condoned or encouraged. And with every Biblical writer, such action is always condemned. For Solomon, the same message is colored with a different choice of words. We see that the wise man should "enter not" and "go not" into the unrighteous path. Reading the second half of the passage, it's near impossible to overlook how many ways our author finds to discourage his audience from that path. Avoid it. Pass not by it. Turn from it. Pass away from it. How many ways can the man say it? And when we see it with Paul's tone, the same question is true. How many ways can the righteous be told to avoid the unrighteous path before they will listen and heed that instruction?

Far too often we find ourselves buried in sinful situations that we put ourselves into in the first place. Our instructions are to flee. Our instructions are to avoid. Our instructions are to shun. These are not merely passive suggestions. If you're on the path of the wicked and headlights come up behind, it's unlikely you'll have enough time to get off the road. So don't get on the path to begin with. Flee, flee, flee.