

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Proverbs 4:1-27
August 18, 2024

Wisdom for Living

Through out my years of mentoring teenagers, one of the worst things I would hear from time to time was “We thought it would be funny if...” And then they would proceed to describe something that began in good nature but ended with either someone getting seriously hurt or visiting the police. What they lacked at the time was wisdom or this deep collective knowing in our gut of the difference between right and wrong or better and best.

Today we turn our attention to the Book of Proverbs which along with Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Job comprise what is known as the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Each has its own voice.

The Book of Proverbs is that of a father speaking to his young son saying, “Be wise. Fear God. Things will go well for you. OR...Be stupid. Ignore God. And they will not.”

Ecclesiastes is that of a middle aged man who provides a more realistic and cynical twist on life saying, “Sometimes things work out, sometimes they do not.”

Then the Book of Job is the story of a much older man who followed God’s Word perfectly and yet calamity hit him anyway.

Three seemly contradictory voices which lead us to believe that life is more complex and that the Bible is more than just an add water and stir...and voila you have the perfect life.

Now the questions that each of these ask are: How should I live in the world? What is the good life? What will God do for me if I try to live this way?

But the folks at the Bible Project describe The Book of Proverbs as a more sophisticated account of human experience with very practical wisdom for every day life. There is a universal quality to them told within a world view of the God of Abraham and the covenant God establishes with his people.

To help us understand understand The Book of Proverbs before we dive into it today, I’d like to show this video from the Bible Project which gives us an overview.¹

With that, please turn with me to Proverbs 4:1-27.

My sons, listen to a father’s teaching.
Pay attention and gain understanding.

¹ <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/proverbs/>

2 I give you good advice.
So don't turn away from what I teach you.

3 I, too, was once a young boy in my father's house.
And my mother loved me deeply.

4 Then my father taught me.
He said to me, "Take hold of my words with all your heart.
Keep my commands, and you will live.

5 Get wisdom, and get understanding.
Don't forget my words or turn away from them.

6 Stay close to wisdom, and she will keep you safe.
Love her, and she will watch over you.

7 To start being wise you must first get wisdom.
No matter what it costs, get understanding.

8 Value wisdom highly, and she will lift you up.
Hold her close, and she will honor you.

9 She will set a beautiful crown on your head.
She will give you a glorious crown."

10 My son, listen. Accept what I say.
Then you will live for many years.

11 I instruct you in the way of wisdom.
I lead you along straight paths.

12 When you walk, nothing will slow you down.
When you run, you won't trip and fall.

13 Hold on to my teaching and don't let it go.
Guard it well, because it is your life.

14 Don't take the path of evil people.
Don't live the way sinners do.

15 Stay away from their path and don't travel on it.
Turn away from it and go on your way.

16 Sinners can't rest until they do what is evil.
They can't sleep until they make someone sin.

17 They do evil just as easily as they eat food.
They hurt others as easily as they drink wine.

18 The path of those who do right is like the sun in the morning.
It shines brighter and brighter until the full light of day.

19 But the way of those who do what is wrong is like deep darkness.
They don't know what makes them trip and fall.

20 My son, pay attention to what I say.
Listen closely to my words.

21 Don't let them out of your sight.
Keep them in your heart.
22 They are life to those who find them.
They are health to a person's whole body.
23 Above everything else, guard your heart.
Everything you do comes from it.
24 Don't speak with twisted words.
Keep evil talk away from your lips.
25 Let your eyes look straight ahead.
Keep looking right in front of you.
26 Think carefully about the paths that your feet walk on.
Always choose the right ways.
27 Don't turn to the right or left.
Keep your feet from the path of evil.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

As I mentioned earlier, proverbs are not unique to the Hebrew Bible. In fact, many cultures and religions throughout time have had their own proverbs.

Take for example these African Proverbs, "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending the night in a closed room with a mosquito" or "The man who tries to walk two roads will split his pants."

A Greek Proverb, "The bow that is always bent will soon break."

A Chinese Proverb, "If you want to know what water is, don't ask the fish."

An American Proverb adopted by President Theodore Roosevelt, "Speak softly and carry a big stick."

Or this Indian Proverb, "Nothing grows under a banyan tree." Banyan trees grow so big, so old, and spread up so far that nothing new can grow beneath them. Perhaps in the same way as when older leaders fail to cultivate younger leaders to take helm after they are gone.

But today, as we look at this set of Biblical Proverbs, I want to consider the three questions we noted earlier that they raise. How should we live in the world? What is the good life? What will God do for us if we try to live this way?

How should we live in the world?

We don't live in isolation, nor are we the first to experience what we are doing. Truly many others before us have experienced similar trials and tribulations, successes and failures. So lets listen to them. Learn from them. Take them to heart even though it might seem trite or trivial. Lets put those things into practice. And let us not swerve from them.

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he preached about the good life and said many things. But when he was challenged by the Pharisees about the greatest commandment in the Law he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all of your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."² In a nutshell, he was saying, that if we simply followed those two things, that everything else would fall into place and we would find the good life.

What then is the good life? Proverbs 4 describes it as full of light, life, and health. It also implies prosperity and being free from guilt and shame. And prosperity means more than just getting a lot of money.

In the Gospel of John Jesus said, "The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come that [you] might have life, and have it to the full."³ The Greek word used for full is *perissos*. It means exceeding abundantly above, very highly, or beyond measure. We get this sense that the life that Jesus desires for us is more than we could ever imagine possible.

What will God do for us if we try to live this way? We will have a long, prosperous, and good life full of light, endurance, and good health. We will be protected from the harm done to us by others and ourselves. And at the end of our lives, just like the Olympic champions we just watched on TV, we will be awarded with garlands of grace on our head and presented with crowns of splendor.

The Apostle Paul passing the baton to his young protegee Timothy said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to others who have longed for his appearing."⁴

Did Paul end up wealthy? No! He experienced real poverty. Was he always treated fairly? No he endured a lot of suffering. And yet he still considered himself to have lived the good life. Why? Because he had the peace of Christ which goes beyond all understanding in his heart. So he died a rich man!

But then what does Proverbs 4 warn us as the antithesis?

How shouldn't we live in the world?

Most importantly, we should not ignore God's ways or God's Word. We shouldn't just do our own thing and ignore the collective wisdom of our elders, particularly our fathers and mothers. We shouldn't follow the paths of the wicked.

² Matthew 22:37-40

³ John 10:10

⁴ 2 Timothy 4:7-8

The Hebrew word for wicked is rasha. It means ungodly, condemned, guilty, or those who knowingly do wrong. So strong is this warning that it says that the wicked can't sleep until they pull others down with them into the slimy pit.

Again the Apostle Paul said, "Do not be misled, bad company corrupts good character."⁵

What is the not so good life? It is dark, deathly, and ill. It is ignorant and follows the advice of people who are not God fearing. It is sleepless, burdensome, and troubled. It's steps are hampered, corrupt, and full of made up lies. Perverse is the wording used. It is also violent, involving harm inflicted by self and others.

The Hebrew of Proverbs describes it as deep darkness, gloomy, and extra thick.

Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."⁶

What will God not do for us if we chose to ignore God's wisdom? God will remove us from his protective hand. He will step back say, "Ok, let's see how this works out for you." And then he'll let us suffer the consequences of our choices.

I'll close with one of my favorite Proverbs that I have shared many times with the young people I've mentored.

Verse 23 says, "Above all else guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life."

The Hebrew word for heart is leb. More than the physical organ that pumps blood throughout our bodies without which we cannot live, it is the center of our emotions, our intellect, and our will. The center of all that makes a person, a person.

We need to guard it. Protect it. Keep watch over it. Because out of it pours the issues of life.

I'll close with these words from James, the brother of Jesus, who said, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."⁷

So may we seek wisdom with all that we've got. May we be kept from the path of evil doers who seek to derail us. And may we receive the good life that God intends for each an every one of us.

Let us pray. Amen!

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:33

⁶ Matthew 7:13-14

⁷ James 1:5