

Proverbs 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 3 My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.

Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart, so you will find favour and good success in the sight of God and man.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes.

Fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh, and refreshment to your bones. Honour the Lord with your wealth, and with the firstfruits of all your produce.

Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, or be weary of his reproof.

[0 : 59] For the Lord reproveth him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding. For the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold.

She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand. In her left hand are riches and honour.

Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her. Those who hold her fast are called blessed. The Lord by wisdom founded the earth.

By understanding he established the heavens. By his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds dropped down the dew. My son, do not lose sight of these.

Keep sound wisdom and discretion, and they will be life for your soul, and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble.

[2 : 00] If you lie down you will not be afraid. When you lie down your sleep will be sweet. Do not be afraid of sudden terror, or of the ruin of the wicked when it comes.

For the Lord will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from being caught. Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.

Do not say to your neighbour, Go and come again, tomorrow I will give it, when you have it with you. Do not plan evil against your neighbour, who dwells trustingly beside you.

Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm. Do not envy a man of violence, and do not choose any of his ways. For the devious person is an abomination to the Lord, but the upright are in his confidence.

The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous.

Toward the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favour. The wise will inherit honour, but fools get disgrace.

[3 : 02] The third and fourth speeches of the book of Proverbs are found in chapter 3. The third is in verses 1-12, and the fourth in verses 13-35.

Once again, this is an address of a father to his son. The third speech presents the son with a series of charges, attended with promises or blessings, keeping the father's commandments, not letting go of steadfast love and faithfulness, trusting the Lord, fearing the Lord, and honouring the Lord, concluding with the admonition not to despise the discipline of the Lord.

The speech begins by enjoining the son to keep the commandments of his human father, but ends with comparing the Lord to a father who lovingly disciplines his son. We might imagine Solomon training his own son here, with the hearer as an eavesdropper.

However, the framing of the father teaching the son need not be focused so narrowly upon such a concrete referent. It may be more of a literary device designed to democratise the book, in terms of the father-son relationship more generally.

The promise with which the speech begins recalls the promise of the fifth commandment in Exodus 20-12. Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you.

[4 : 17] In the speech that follows, in verse 16 of this chapter, length of days is presented as the reward of wisdom. The blessing promised to the son who honours his father's instruction, presumably comes because the wisdom of the father's instruction and counsel will guard the son's ways as he is beginning in his way, and has not yet internalised wisdom himself, and as he matures will also prove their wisdom to him in his own experience.

Perhaps the greatest of the challenges with regard to wisdom is where to find it. If you are not yet wise, how are you to know where to look for it? The instruction of parents is a very natural, and in most situations the most promising, place to begin.

Wisdom first comes to us in the form of authoritative commandments that must be kept. Authority provides us with a reason for action before we have reasons of our own. However, good authority seeks to inform obedience, so that it is offered increasingly willingly, rather than by coercion or mere thoughtless compliance.

Parental authority may begin with the command, but it seeks to acquaint the child with the goodness of what is commanded, so that the principle with which the child is first acquainted as an external constraint or demand becomes a willing and witting principle of behaviour, which the child comes proactively to observe and understand.

The statement of the father to the son here gestures towards just such a type of formation. The son must treasure and hold on to steadfast love and faithfulness, virtues that seem to correspond with the fear of the Lord in chapter 16 verse 6.

[5 : 49] While superstitious persons might bind protective charms around their necks, the son here is told that he will discover his father's teaching in the fear of the Lord will readily answer to such an end.

The father's teaching will also be like an adornment that a man might wear around his neck that would attract people's attention and praise. He must also write them upon the tablet of his heart. Memorisation of the instruction of the father is a critical step in the process of internalising the wisdom of his lessons. The word hidden in the tablet of the heart should also recall for us the tablet of the law in the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle, which among other things symbolised the human heart.

Proverbs chapter 6 verses 20 to 22 make a similar statement. My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching. Bind them on your heart always, tie them around your neck.

When you walk, they will lead you. When you lie down, they will watch over you. And when you awake, they will talk with you. The hearer should likely remember the words of Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 9 here, and recognise the implicit association between the teaching of the father and the teaching of the law, and between the father's teaching of his son and the Lord's teaching of Israel as his firstborn son.

[7 : 08] Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. In Deuteronomy chapter 6, the word of the law, the word of the Lord's teaching of his son Israel, is communicated by fathers to their sons.

Just as the Lord promises prosperity to Israel if they diligently keep his commandments, so the father here gives his son a similar assurance of blessing if he observes his instruction.

Children are initially cast upon their parents. They depend upon their parents and don't have much of a choice but to trust them. Wisdom requires this initial stage of trust.

[8 : 08] We will never obtain wisdom without trusting others to direct us into it. The challenge is to trust the right people and to move to a point where we are increasingly exercising our trust responsibly, circumspectly and with discretion, rather than merely trusting people because we cannot do otherwise.

Over time, for instance, we will find our trust of wise people is rewarded with blessing, which makes ongoing trust of them even more reasonable and understandable. The good father recognises his own limitations as a guide in the path of wisdom.

And while he wants to direct his son as far as he can, the primary form of direction that he can give is to wiser teachers than he. Above all else, his task is to direct his son towards the Lord.

In the rest of this third speech, the father teaches his son to relate to the Lord with trust, fear and honour and to submit to his discipline. This is the most important lesson that he can teach, for the fear of the Lord is the wellspring and the greatest substance of wisdom.

To trust in the Lord is, among other things, to observe his commandments in the confidence of his ordering of the world and in his providential rule over it. Those who depend on their own impressions will often be tempted to divert from the Lord's instructions as they believe that success and prosperity will come more readily by following their own counsels.

[9 : 29] They see the wicked prospering and believe that they would be better off if they followed them in their ways rather than walking in the way of uprightness. We see the psalmist struggling with this in places like Psalm 73 where Asaph describes his initial envy of the wicked as they apparently prospered, wondering whether his righteousness was all in vain.

It was only through trust in the Lord and in turning to him that he was brought back from that brink. Psalm 37 describes something similar in verses 1 to 7. Fret not yourself because of evildoers.

Be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good. Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday.

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Wisdom is about the long-term course of our lives, about what we sow and what we will reap.

[10 : 41] It is about the consistency to make good commitments and to follow through with them, doggedly persevering even when things look unpromising. Here we see that wisdom is a matter of living by faith, not by sight.

The time should come when that faith is confirmed by sight. But much of the time we simply have to act in a stubborn and daring confidence that the world is ruled by the Lord, and that if we commit our ways to him and act in dependence upon him, we will be blessed by him.

Even when there may be many contrary and disheartening appearances along the way, the Lord will guard us from a myriad unseen dangers, protecting our paths, not allowing us to be tempted beyond what we are able, and leading us in a path whose destination is blessedness.

Fear of the Lord here involves turning away from evil. It is also the alternative to being wise in one's own eyes. It involves a posture of humility, a recognition that we have not attained to wisdom, and that we need to trust the Lord, who is its true source.

Wisdom can be pursued, but we will never fully possess it. Trust in and fear of the Lord should be accompanied by an honouring of the Lord. Here the Father gives the specific case of the presentation of the firstfruits to the Lord.

[11 : 55] The firstfruits are the beginning of the produce, of the harvest, the things one might be most tempted to keep back, leaving the Lord with whatever is left over at the end instead. While this relates to agricultural produce, we should probably discern a metaphor for our lives here.

The son might think that he wants to keep the firstfruits of the harvest of his life to himself. One could imagine him thinking, these are the best years of my life, my late teens and early twenties. Surely I should be allowed to enjoy them on my own terms, to have a good time, to sow my wild oats, and then I will serve the Lord in my thirties. However, when the thirties come, the path of folly will be well set, and its bitter harvest already starting to appear.

Had he honoured the Lord by presenting him with the firstfruits of his years, he would be prospering, and experiencing rich blessing in many areas of his life. We should not delay our service of the Lord.

We should give him the firstfruits of our life, our week, our day, our wealth, and we will be richer in the rest of it on that account. The Lord, as a loving father, disciplines his sons.

[13 : 01] Those who trust in, fear, and honour the Lord will also find that they are disciplined by him, which, as the author of Hebrews argues, quoting verses 11 to 12 of this chapter, while never

pleasant at the time, later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

The father wants to bring out virtue in his son, to form his son into his good character. The Lord wants us to grow as those created in his image, which relates to the theme of sonship in scripture. This, however, requires painful correction, as the Lord deals with our folly, often through bringing us into suffering on its account. If we want to be treated as sons and to grow into a closer relationship with our heavenly father, we are asking for the Lord to take our sin and our folly seriously and to deal with us in ways sufficient to correct them.

If there is one thing that the proud fool dislikes, it is correction and rebuke. However, the wise and good son desires such correction. He wishes to grow by it.

The wise cultivate great sensitivity to correction, while fools harden themselves against it. As Proverbs chapter 17 verse 10 puts it, a rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.

[14:16] The fourth speech of the father takes us from verses 13 to 35, stringing together four distinct sections, verses 13 to 18, 19 to 20, 21 to 26, and 27 to 35, as Bruce Waltke notes.

It begins with an encomium to wisdom, extolling its surpassing value. Verses 13 to 18 concern the blessedness of the man who finds wisdom, beginning with the beatitude, blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding.

Wealth offers many advantages and benefits, but wisdom, the father assures his son, greatly exceeds wealth in its value and should be valued and pursued over everything else.

If the son obtains wisdom, many of the blessings that the fools pursue without it will be granted to him by her. Long life, riches and honour. The long life being in wisdom's right hand suggests its greater value than riches and honour, which are on her left.

The hearer of this passage may recall Solomon's own valuation of wisdom over everything else, when the Lord appeared to him in his dream at Gibeon in 1 Kings 3, 6-13, and offered him what he wanted.

[15:28] Solomon said, You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you.

And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father.

Although I am but a little child, I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude.

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to govern this your great people? It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

And God said to him, Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, Behold, I now do according to your word.

[16:28] Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you, and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour, so that no other king shall compare with you all your days.

Besides the gifts that she offers to those who seek her, wisdom's ways are pleasant and peaceful. Solomon's wisdom was associated with the peace and flourishing of Israel as a nation.

The tree of life brings us back to the Garden of Eden. The tree of life was in the centre of the garden and offered eternal life and healing to those who ate of it. The hearer should think back to the story of Genesis and to mankind's attempt to grasp at the treasures of autonomous wisdom from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil before they were ready to receive it.

As a result, they were expelled from the garden, particularly in order that they might not have access to that tree. They were also frustrated in their labours from that point onwards. Wisdom, however, offers something of a path back into the garden.

In submitting to the Lord and seeking wisdom, rather than seeking to steal her fruit, one will get to enjoy her fruit and enjoy the blessings of life that come from it. Adam and Eve sought the fruit of the

tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order to grasp at a divine-like status and power which God had manifested in his act of creation.

[17 : 48] In verses 19 to 20, after the promise of wisdom serving as a tree of life to those who seek her, the father tells his son that the Lord himself acted by wisdom in his creation and his founding of the earth and the heavens.

The world order is the product of the Lord's wisdom. That wisdom pervades it as the imminent principle of its operations. The Lord doesn't merely create as an act of power, but also as an expression of his immeasurable wisdom.

Verse 20 shows that the Lord also sustains the world by his wise providence. We are already here venturing in the direction of the personification of wisdom as a quasi-divine principle, something that will be developed in much more detail in chapter 8.

From extolling wisdom, the father moves to exhorting his son relative to it. He must make sure to obtain it and to keep hold of it at all costs. If he does so, he will experience immense benefits on its account, life, adornment, security, and deliverance from fear and danger.

The foolish walk on dark and dangerous paths, but the wise son walks in secure, straight, and well-lit ways. He won't need to fear the pits, traps, and snares that afflict the wicked and the fools.

[19 : 02] The security of the path comes both from the path's inherently safer character and from the fact that the Lord watches over, protects, and guards those who walk upon it. The chapter concludes with a series of instructions concerning a proper relationship to neighbours.

Verses 27-30 encouraged the son readily to show good to all to whom he has any obligation, to the extent of his power to do so. He must not be grudging or reluctant in his generosity.

We might here recall passages such as Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 7-10. If among you one of your brothers shall become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart, and you say, The seventh year, the year of release is near, and your eye looked grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing. And he cried to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin.

You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

[20 : 18] Likewise, the son must be wary of delaying or deferring his obligations of generosity to his neighbour. He must be speedy and never withholding in his assistance. From reluctance in generosity, verses 29-30, warn the son against malicious and violent actions against his neighbour.

He must not conspire against his neighbour, nor should he be litigious and a starter of quarrels, bringing accusations against the innocent, presumably intending to advantage himself in such a manner.

The tenth commandment condemns the sin of covetousness, a sin that lies at the root of so many others. In the wisdom literature, envy and desire are given much closer attention. While the law focuses upon more external actions, the wisdom literature is concerned to describe the growth of sin from its first incipients to its final bitter harvest.

Here the son might be tempted to envy the wicked men of violence and their seeming ease. The psalmist expresses such envy in Psalm 73, verses 3-13.

For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are.

[21 : 30] They are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies.

They scoff and speak with malice. Loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongue struts through the earth. Therefore his people turn back to them and find no fault in them.

And they say, How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease. They increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

The father here is very concerned that his son not fall into this trap. In verses 32-35, the father supports his warning against envy of the wicked.

The final end of fools and the wicked is disgrace, as the Lord is opposed to all of their ways and his curse rests upon them. Their downfall is sure to come, but those who trust in and fear and honour the Lord will themselves inherit honour.

[22 : 38] A question to consider. What are some ways in which we can make ourselves more receptive to the correction and discipline of the Lord?