

Proverbs 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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When the time comes, they will be expected to teach their own sons as fathers in their turn. Within these verses, we can see that part of the destiny of the son setting out on the path towards wisdom is that he become a father himself one day, and pass on the lessons that he learned to a new generation.

The father-son relationship is such that the father is raising another to fill his position in the chain of the generations. A son is a potential father, and a good father is a son who has attained to an appropriate maturity.

[3 : 4 3] The sons here may be not a group of brothers, but a group of students, a possibility Michael Fox mentions. Bruce Waltke suggests the possibility that the father might be speaking not to a group of his immediate children, but to the multi-generational lineage arising from him.

The grandfather's training of the father began when he was still very young and impressionable, still very much within the orbit of his mother and dependent on her tenderness. The image here is of a loving household, with two parents actively committed to their child's care and instruction.

The importance of the involvement of fathers and mothers in the raising of the son is seen at many points in the book of Proverbs. Father and mother both bring something distinct to the task of child-rearing, and there are different areas where the teaching of one or the other becomes more important.

Gender dynamics pervade the book of Proverbs in ways to which we ought to be attentive. The father-son relationship is treated as paradigmatic for the passing on of wisdom, but the quest for the right woman is seen as paradigmatic for attaining it.

Wisdom is personified as a woman, and the book ends with a great poem concerning the wise wife. The most important thing in the instruction of the grandfather reported by the father was that the son must get wisdom, here implicitly personified as the woman he should want as his bride.

[5 : 0 3] As Genesis chapter 2 verse 24 teaches, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife in marriage. In many respects, the paradigmatic process of a son's development is from the tender care of his mother, to the instruction in the law of his father, to the arms of his bride.

Both the mother and the father have to propel their son towards another. The mother needs to move the son more into the orbit of his father, lest he remain a psychologically underdeveloped mother's boy.

The father needs to move the son out into the world, so that he can move out of his father's shadow and start his own household and family. A crucial part of the instruction that will make this move possible is teaching in the quest for a bride.

And here the real bride that must be sought is Lady Wisdom. The father's teaching will last for a season, but the time will come when the son must move out from under it, and it is imperative that he does so as one devoted to Lady Wisdom as his bride.

The rewards of having Lady Wisdom as one's bride are considerable. One possesses wisdom not as knowledge in one's brain, so much as in a manner akin to the way that one might have a wife.

[6 : 13] A husband has a wife as he commits himself to her, doesn't forsake her as he loves her, prizes her and honours her. The same is true of Wisdom. The son is exhorted to devote himself to Wisdom, as he might devote himself to his wife.

To possess Wisdom as his own requires an enduring and deepening commitment and relationship with her, a posture of heart towards something distinct from himself, to which he must always be rightly comported.

As he commits himself to Wisdom as his bride, Wisdom will keep him, guard him, exalt him, honour him, adorn him, and crown him with the beautiful crown that a bridegroom might wear.

For Proverbs, the quest for Wisdom is much more like a lifelong love affair than it is like the accumulation of information, as our own culture can often think of it. The controlling metaphor starts to shift from verse 11 onwards, with the theme of marriage to Wisdom being replaced by that of walking in the ways of Wisdom.

The exhortation to the son to heed his father's words is once again attended with the familiar promise of the fifth commandment. The days of those who heed the words of their parents will be long in the land.

[7 : 21] The palette of the metaphor of the paths of Wisdom includes terms such as The juxtaposition of the way of righteousness and the way of wickedness here is familiar to us from other parts of scripture, reminding us of places such as Psalm 1, and its warning against walking in the way of the wicked.

The metaphor of walking highlights the way that Wisdom is, for Proverbs, primarily about the art of living well, rather than about mere head knowledge. Wisdom is displayed in the realm of behaviour, and the teaching of Wisdom is mentoring and discipleship in the skills of life.

The language of verse 13 makes clear that Wisdom is something that must be diligently persisted in, never abandoned, and vigilantly guarded. Wisdom is nothing less than the son's life.

If he loses wisdom, he loses everything. The path of the wicked, in contrast to the way of wisdom, is treacherous and must be avoided at all costs. In verses 14 and 15, the father adds warning to warning, lest the son fail to recognise just how imperative it is that he resists the law of the way of the wicked.

The verses that follow describe the wicked as those whose regular bodily rest is hampered by their commitment to evil. Wickedness consumes them. They are obsessed with it. It becomes more essential to them than sleep, and they're very food and drink.

[8 : 52] There couldn't be a starker contrast than there is between the path of such evil men and the path of the righteous. The father adopts the very strongest of oppositions to describe the difference.

It's the difference between light and darkness. The path of the righteous isn't merely like light, but it is like the rising light of the dawn. It becomes clearer and more glorious as it ascends.

Righteousness matures over time. The wisdom of those who have persisted in the way of wisdom for many years greatly exceeds those who are just setting out on it. By contrast, the wicked walk a crooked way, shrouded in a stygian pitch, unable to see where they tread, and ultimately doomed to stumbling.

The concluding speech of the chapter, its third, once again exhorts the son to vigilance. He must be attentive and incline his ear to the sayings of his father, not letting them out of his sight, and carefully keeping them in his heart.

The word jealously guarded in the heart is like the tablets of the law in the Ark of the Covenant. This is, the father assures him, nothing short of life and healing, like the tree of life to which wisdom was likened in the preceding chapter.

[10:02] The wise words of the father must be found. They require the son to search them out, to pursue them, and to devote himself to them. Merely hearing them is not enough. They cannot be carelessly possessed.

Many people have much information in their brains, but they have never pursued wisdom in order to find it. Our preeminent importance is the guarding of the heart. Everything flows from the heart.

The heart is like the inner sanctuary. It is like the garden with a fountain from which the river flows out. We are to be the gardeners, who keep and tend our own hearts like a hidden garden.

The heart is the secret spring from which everything arises, and mastering it is our first, our greatest, and our most enduring task. The heart is exposed to the sight of God, but generally veiled to others.

We are often most concerned with how we appear in the sight of others, and will go to much effort to make ourselves appear righteous to our neighbour, little mindful of how we appear to the God who sees the hearts of men.

[11:02] However, the scripture charges us to be most vigilant and concerned with our hearts in the sight of God. As Robert Murray McShane purportedly, but perhaps apocryphally, said, What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more.

The state of our heart is upstream from everything else. The pollution of our hearts will defile every one of our actions, or alternatively, its godliness can be a source of life to all who come into contact with us.

From the heart upstream, the Father concludes by looking downstream to the mouth, the eyes, and the feet. Evil speech is described using similar language to that of the evil way.

It is crooked. It is devious. It is not straightforward. In Proverbs, it is the mouth that first reveals the state of the heart. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks, as our Lord says.

In addition to the mouth, the eyes must be fixed on what is most important. If your eyes are not fixed, you will not be walking in a straight way. The person whose attention is distracted, whose eyes are constantly diverted from the things that they ought to be focused upon, will always be in danger of stumbling.

[12:15] The movement from the well-guarded heart, to the well-ordered eyes that are fixed on the things that really matter, to the foot that walks in the path of righteousness, is one that is very much in line with the message of Proverbs more generally.

One of the things being expressed in these verses is that the whole of the body must be coordinated in the task of righteousness, in the way of wisdom. A question to consider.

How does this chapter's portrayal of wisdom differ from common portrayals within our current day? What might we learn from the contrast?