
Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight, for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching. When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honour you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown."

(Proverbs 4:1-9)

Introduction

What comes into your mind when you think of wisdom? Perhaps wisdom connotes ideas of abstract insight and knowledge, of sages and professors, men and women way beyond *my age*.

What comes into your mind when you think of wisdom? Let's consider this question as we turn to Proverbs 4:1-9.

Torah Obedience

Chapter four falls within the broader context of chapters 1-9. The main theme of these chapters is the image of a father instructing his son. But it is not just *any* father and son relationship. It is king Solomon, giving instruction to his son; it is *kingly instruction*.

Scripture tells us that the king of Israel occupied a unique responsibility of relating to Yahweh as *his* very own son. In turn, the king was supposed to lead the people of Israel in faithfulness and in obedience to Torah. The king acted like a mediator of God's instruction; in one sense, the king *embodied* the nation.

This was a weighty task, and we sense the severity of it in the opening verses of our text: "Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, be attentive, that you may gain insight, for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching" (vv. 1-2).

The nation's faithfulness to Yahweh rose or fell on the king's faithfulness to Yahweh. Solomon knew full well the responsibility resting on the shoulders of his son.

Torah People

But, more than that, the blessing of faithfulness to God as a king and nation extended even beyond the walls of Israel. When God covenanted with David in 2 Samuel 7, David spoke of the covenant, the kingdom that God promised, as being “instruction for mankind,” literally for *humanity*. So the ways of Yahweh were to be made known *through* the nation of Israel, and specifically through the king who *embodied* that nation.

But exactly what was this instruction? How was the king of Israel to relate to God and to God’s people? Verses 3–9 tell us:

When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, he taught me and said to me, “Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honour you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”

(Proverbs 4:4–9)

The kingly instruction is a call to “Get wisdom” (v. 5). As we see in v. 4b, getting this wisdom, keeping these commandments, brought with it the promise of *life*: “Hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and *live*.”

Solomon tells us elsewhere that whoever finds wisdom “finds life and obtains favour from the LORD, but he who fails to find wisdom *injures* himself; all who hate wisdom *love death*” (8:35–36).

So it seems that wisdom is essential for *life* and *prosperity*; life for the king, life for Israel, life for the nations in darkness. Friends, God’s instruction, God’s Word has always been the means through which he creates, renews, and assembles a people for himself.

Where do we look for renewal and hope? In magazines? From TV shows? From peers or family older than you? From motivational quotes or feel-good one-liners? On Facebook or Instagram? In the blogosphere? Brothers and sisters, look no further than this life giving Word of God. Feed from it. Immerse yourself in it. You will never regret it.

Solomon’s plea here for his son to get this wisdom is communicated through a metaphor: Wisdom is likened to a woman: “Do not forsake *her*, and *she* will keep you; love *her* and *she* will guard you.... Prize *her* highly and *she* will exalt you; *she* will honour you if you embrace *her*.”

The key to living in faithfulness and obedience to Yahweh rests in embracing wisdom. The king was to leave no room between himself and this woman, wisdom. This embrace was to be intimate, and her benefits were many: The king would be kept, guarded, exalted, honoured, and she'd clothe and crown him with grace and beauty.

I can't help but think of the contrast here with other parts of Proverbs, where Solomon speaks of the simple, the fool, the ungodly, and the wicked as those who embrace *another* woman: the adulteress. "Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?" (Proverbs 5:20). Again, "Say to wisdom, 'You are my sister,' and call insight your intimate friend, to keep you from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words" (Proverbs 7:4–5).

To embrace the forbidden woman, Solomon tells us, was to walk down into Sheol, "going down to the chambers of death" itself (7:27). Instead, the king was to embrace wisdom, for his life and the life of his people depended on it.

You may be asking, just what is this wisdom we speak of? Well, if you remember how, Solomon begins the book with these words: "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in *righteousness, justice, and equity*; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth" (1:1–4).

Righteousness. Justice. Equity. This is the substance of wisdom. This is the case because these things – righteousness, justice, and equity – *belong to* and *come from* God (Psalm 89:14; Isaiah 61:8).

Friends, God *is* righteous; God *is* morally perfect; God enacts justice; God *seeks* and *maintains* equity; God *acts* in fairness and without partiality.

To embrace wisdom was to embrace all that God *is* and all that God *loves*. The king was to recognise wisdom, embrace her and never leave her. She was to govern his thoughts, his actions, his dealings, and his judgements. He was to rule in righteous judgement, bringing about equity and extending mercy to the afflicted.

Torah Failure

The king of Israel was to be a shepherd of the people of God: instructing and resembling the way of righteousness. He was the *steward* of Torah—God's instruction to his people—to bring light to the nations, to magnify the name of Yahweh and represent his rule.

Yet, there is not a king in Israel who *succeeded* in this task. Not one was truly faithful and obedient in leading the nation in righteousness, justice, and equity. Light and life did not extend to the nations. Wisdom was forsaken, forgotten, and Hated. And so death naturally followed.

Gospel Obedience

But the story of the Bible doesn't end there. It tells us of a certain king who was faithful to Yahweh as a Son, who was obedient in living out Torah, and who, in fact, because of his own life, has brought light and life to the nations. He promises to bring all peoples into covenant relationship with God.

Friends, this certain person is Jesus of Nazareth. He did not sin, nor was there deceit found in his mouth. He perfectly embodied God's instruction. He fulfilled the whole law. And he offered up himself for our sins, for the many ways in which we had broken God's law.

Now, whoever turns from their sin and turns to Jesus, trusting him for the forgiveness of their sins, Jesus makes them new – a new creation. Jesus, the obedient and faithful King, Son of God, then gives to his people the very Spirit of God, who powerfully works obedience and covenant faithfulness in our own lives.

Gospel People

As already mentioned, the central function of the king of Israel was to effect the instruction of Yahweh in the lives of the people and even the nations.

Well, Jesus does just that: He now calls a people out of the kingdom of darkness and into his kingdom of light. Those who trust in him and repent of their sins, he calls to be a people who reflect the king *in* and *through* their lives. He calls us to be kings and priests to God.

Brothers and sisters, *we are* to be a people concerned with this wisdom: a wisdom that manifests itself in righteousness, practising justice, and working for equity.

Friends, living as wise people simply means that our hearts should overlap with the heart of God; that we love what he loves and hate what he hates. It is the righteous, Solomon says, who "gives thought to his ways."

He also tells us that, "the way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but he loves him who pursues righteousness" (15:9). And, "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice" (21:3).

I am afraid that our concepts of “wisdom” are too *heady*. They’re all up here. And they stay up here. My fear is that we might be, to some extent, blind guides.

Do you remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees, who were so concerned with the letter of the law? What did our King say to them?

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

(Matthew 23:23–24)

Brothers and sisters, what matters of justice, mercy and faithfulness have we neglected for the sake of our own ideas of obedience? Following Jesus, the King, means that we adhere to *all* that he has commanded us, not just those things we like or find more comfortable.

What injustices do we turn our eyes away from—simply because we’re not affected? Where have we drawn limits and lines as to how much mercy we extend to others? Wisdom is to not only take hold of our heads, but also our *hearts* and our *hands*.

Friends, which woman are we embracing? Are we embracing the wisdom of Jesus’ kingdom? Or are we embracing the woman of worldly wisdom and lust? Are fighting for the good of others? Loving our enemy? Turning the other cheek? Walking two kilometres when only one is asked for?

Such wisdom—such righteousness and justice—will also wield the sword for the very purposes of *establishing* justice among those who have previously been denied it.

Friends, I don’t mean for us to only look outside of these walls. “The problem is out there,” we might be thinking. I think Jonathan Leeman has it right:

Do you know where the world should first witness this just and lasting peace? In the life and fellowship of the boundary-defying local church. It’s in the local church where we first beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. It’s in the church where one-time enemies learn to love one another.

We should be thinking less about redeeming the nation and more about *living as a redeemed nation*.

Conclusion

Friends, get wisdom. Get insight. Do not forget her. Do not turn away from her. Do not forsake her. She will not only keep, guard, exalt, honour, impart grace and a beautiful crown on your head, but such benefits will extend beyond you and into the lives of others. Friends, get wisdom.

AMEN