

Get Smart
Studies in the book of *Proverbs*
What Good is Wisdom to Me?

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Get Smart: What Good is Wisdom to Me?

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Background Notes

Scriptures: Proverbs 2:1-22; 3:1-6.

Introduction

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” — T.S. Eliot.¹

In our self-help culture, there’s a danger in asking the question posed by this week’s title. Like so many promised solutions to human problems, wisdom could become for us the private technique for ironing out the wrinkles, filling in the potholes, and patching up the cracks in our highly individualized worlds. “What Good is Wisdom?” is on its own merits a legitimate inquiry. Certainly wisdom has designs on making the world whole once more, and through wisdom God intends to bring to completion His new creation which He started in Jesus Christ. Not that any of that rules out a personal appropriation of wisdom’s benefits to “my life.”

Yet, wisdom pushes us beyond the sentiment of Paul Anka’s 1968 lyrics, made famous by Frank Sinatra, “My Way”:²

And now, the end is here
And so I face the final curtain
My friend, I'll say it clear
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain
I've lived a life that's full
I traveled each and ev'ry highway
And more, much more than this, I did it my way

Regrets, I've had a few
But then again, too few to mention
I did what I had to do and saw it through without exemption
I planned each charted course, each careful step along the
byway
And more, much more than this, I did it my way

Yes, there were times, I'm sure you knew
When I bit off more than I could chew
But through it all, when there was doubt

I ate it up and spit it out
I faced it all and I stood tall and did it my way

I've loved, I've laughed and cried
I've had my fill, my share of losing
And now, as tears subside, I find it all so amusing
To think I did all that
And may I say, not in a shy way,
"Oh, no, oh, no, not me, I did it my way"

For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who
kneels
The record shows I took the blows and did it my way!

Yes, it was my way

To which the wisdom-writer of *Proverbs* might well ask sarcastically, “Did you, now?” Perhaps the lyricist needs reminding that some people who kneel are actually benefitted by it, especially when they ask for wisdom from someone other than themselves. How much fuller life would have been, and the present crisis would become not the final curtain but the new creation.

¹ T.S. Eliot, “The Rock,” 1934.

² Anka wrote the song specifically for Sinatra, but he got the inspiration from a French tune (“Comme d’habitude” [“As Usual”], 1967). He wrote it as he thought Sinatra would want to sing it, and found the words strangely different from his own. True to form, this song of unceasing individualism is considered the most “remade” song in history. There are versions by Dorothy Squires, Elvis Presley, Sid Vicious, and Nina Hagen, among others. So I guess we can say, each remake did “My Way” in “my way.”

What this week's big idea tells us is that God's wisdom, as revealed in *Proverbs*, seeks *His Good* for us. Not *our good* or *what we think is good*, but what God the Creator by His infinite wisdom *knows to be the good* for each and everyone of us. By adding the word "me" to this question, we don't want to isolate God's *good* for us *individually* from His *good* for us as *the people of God*. That God has such a *good* for us both individually and collectively is clear from texts like these:

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them (Romans 8:28).

And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. (Deuteronomy 6:24).

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness (Hebrews 12:10).

God's *good* for us directs *the way* that we take. As we noted in our last study, *Proverbs* is concerned about the *way* we walk — that is, about the conduct and direction of our life. Since the ancients traveled a great deal on foot across long and often rugged pathways, it was only natural for the writer of the proverbs to frequently borrow travel language to talk about wise living. The Bible uniformly tells us about how we should "walk" when it gives us spiritual guidance. Our "walk" ultimately has to do with the moral and spiritual habits we are forming in our characters. It has to do with the development of what some have called our "second nature" — the one which God gave to us when we were "born again," and which eventually replaces our old nature as we surrender ourselves completely to Him. Wisdom is God's personal agency which energizes this process and guides it to its completion.

Culturally, we are *consumers*, and the dogma which seduces us is *consumerism*, which constantly reminds us that this or that commercial enterprise knows best *what is good for us*. If a need doesn't yet exist for a product, the seller will create it. We are told what we need by the magic of manipulating what we want. The most effective TV ads depict scenes filled with warm and exciting places where air-brushed human beings are doing pleasure filled activities. Once the viewer starts feeling especially buoyant the real product suddenly pops on the screen in hopes that our feeling good about the scene will get transferred to the product. It's a classic existential bait-and-switch, and people fall for it all the time. Let's face it, people, there isn't a car on the planet good enough to save our souls, no matter how cleverly it's packaged.

Consumerism is kindled, according to sociologist Jean Baudrillard, "only when people come to mythically believe that they have certain needs that can only be satisfied through consumption. From that point, they need to need and they desire to desire instead of consuming goods themselves, they consume the meanings of goods as those have been constructed through advertising in marketing and a sense, they become what they buy."³ The question is do they become something *good* or something *bad*? Can consumerism promise not to harm but only to do good for us?

Mark Medley, in an ethics web-site at Baylor University; says, "consumerism encourages the least attractive human traits:" Avarice, which is another word for greed, aggression and self-centeredness. Another author on that same website says, "As consumers — as consumerism especially at century's end — becomes an increasingly individualistic and private affair, we risk losing key virtues that stabilize and promote social life. Things like care for others, compromise, friendship, responsibility to the past; and felt obligation for the future."⁴ These are things which wisdom promotes as *good for us*.

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988), 166-184.

⁴ <http://www.baylor.edu/christianethics/ConsumerismarticleMedley.pdf> [as of June 8, 2010].

Yes, this week's study declares confidently that *wisdom is good for us*, and to the details of that proposition, we now turn.

The Main Text: Proverbs 2:1-22

My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, ² making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; ³ yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, ⁴ if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; ⁷ he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, ⁸ guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints. ⁹ Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; ¹⁰ for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; ¹¹ discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, ¹² delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, ¹³ who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, ¹⁴ who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, ¹⁵ men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways. ¹⁶ So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, ¹⁷ who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God; ¹⁸ for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed; ¹⁹ none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life. ²⁰ So you will walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous. ²¹ For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it, ²² but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.

Context

As we noted in our last study, Proverbs 1-9 form the Prologue to the whole collection. Within it we discussed the Preamble (1:1-7). According to one analysis,⁵ ten different "lectures" appear in the first nine chapters:

1. 1:8-19
2. 2:1-22 — This week's study.
3. 3:1-12
4. 3:21-35
5. 4:1-9
6. 4:10-19
7. 4:20-27
8. 5:1-23
9. 6:20-35
10. 7:1-27

Several themes weave their messages throughout the whole:

- Wisdom calls us to salvation
- Wisdom calls us to true wealth
- Wisdom calls us to life

Special emphasis falls on the "path" or the "way" we walk through life. Wisdom ought to be our constant companion on the journey, assisting us in a variety of ways:

- Protects (2:1-22)
- Directs (3:1-35)
- Perfects (4:1-27)

Serious *warnings* take center stage in 5:1-7:27, with special attention to the dangers of *sexual sins*:

- Disappointment (5:1-23)
- Destruction (6:1-35)
- Death (7:1-27)12

⁵ Michael V. Fox, "The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 No 2 (1994): 233-243.

The two large contrasts in the Preamble are between the Wise and the Wicked. However, no less than five different kinds of people appear in this material:

1. The wise
2. The wicked
3. The simple
4. The scorner
5. The fool

This week’s reading belongs to the second lecture. Within 2:1-22, there are three main sections:

- a. Exordium (2:1-11)
- b. Lesson (2:12-19)
- c. Conclusion (2:20-22)

A series of “if” statements dominate 2:1-4, followed by two “then” statements in 2:5-11. From this movement of thought, the writer directs attention on the lesson or application of this material to various forms of wickedness in 2:12-19). At last, the hopeful consequences of following the “wisdom way” are given in 2:20-22. The following table summarizes this material:

If	Then	Because		So that
You attend to my teachings (2:1-4)	You will attain to true piety 2:5)	it is God who gives wisdom (2:6)		You will go on the right path (2:20)
		And this will protect you (2:7-8)	From	Which is the salvation of the righteous (2:21-22)
			wicked men (2:12-15)	
			wicked women (2:16-19)	

What is the main idea? It is simply this, spoken by a father to his son: if you do what I say, you will learn wisdom, which will bring you to the fear of God and His righteousness, which will protect you and keep you away from wicked men and women, and thereby ensure you a full life.

Wisdom Education

What the father is doing in this passage is launching the education of his son — *wisdom education*, to be precise. Step by step, the text moves through a process leading to wisdom.

1. Learn and imbibe the father’s precepts (2:1).

The writer addresses himself to “my son” (*b^enî*), underscoring the relational and personal nature of wisdom. Every time we read about the words of the father to his son, we ought to think about God’s Word speaking to us. The phrase is used some 23 times in the book of *Proverbs*. It’s hard to miss the family and social context in which wisdom does its work. This is not about a few remarkable individuals becoming *wise*, while the rest of the world is left behind. God wants His whole family, in heaven and on earth, to share in His wisdom. Rightly related to God as His children, we sit at His feet and learn from His Word. Wisdom takes place within the *Fellowship of the Father*. One of the ways we come to share in the image of God — His likeness in us — is through imbibing his wisdom.

“My words” is a phrase which comes from the Hebrew *’imrāh* and has to do with “utterance, speech.” The sort of language which expresses wisdom is not a mere object, but has its source and origin as a speech act

from God Himself. The noun form of this word comes from the most common verb for “speaking” found in the Old Testament.

“My commands” puts emphasis on the *duty* associated with the wisdom of the father. In effect, God is telling us “This is what *I want* done.” Much like the words at creation, “Let there be ...” followed by :...and there was...” God’s commands are not burdensome, nor are they intended to weigh down His children with impossible responsibilities. Whatever God *commands* He also makes possible the fulfillment. The sort of wisdom *Proverbs* encourages creates a sense of moral and ethical responsibility, not just a compendium of abstract ideas.

“Treasure” comes from the Hebrew *tzāpan* which has to do with hiding something so as to protect it. It also has to do with the supreme value attached to what is hidden. Wisdom teaches us to value some things above others and to show that attitude by the way we carefully protect what we value.

2. Eagerly desire the words of the father which are the only way to wisdom (2:2).

“Pay close attention” is the essential meaning of the next statement. Taken from the Hebrew word *qāšab*, this term also has to do with “hearing” which has its eye on “obeying.” Imagine someone giving special instructions for an exceedingly critical task. We hang on every word *because we know that very soon we will be expected to carry out the instructions*. Wisdom is strong on paying attention since actions will follow soon afterwards.

The two main terms, “wisdom” and “understanding” appear together in this verse. We are to pay close attention to *wisdom* since wisdom is asking us to do something. In addition, we are “to incline our heart” to *understanding*. The root word (as noted in the last study) is *bîn*, focusing on “discernment and insight.” In the present context, the form used is *ʾēbûnāh*. The emphasis is on the inner nature and significance of what is known about something. To understand means to grasp the meaning, importance, and distinctiveness of what we know. The word translated “incline” literally means “stretch out, spread out, bend (*nātāh*).” The implication is that we must put forth exertive effort to acquire understanding. Wisdom teaches patience and endurance to knowledge. This is a matter of “the heart,” the writer tells us. Again, the word *lēb* is used as the organic symbol for the whole inner life as it is directed toward some goal, or mustered into service for some cause. Mind, emotions, will, and body come together in a single collaborative effort.

3. The student of wisdom must summon wisdom — call for it (2:3).

Throughout the book of *Proverbs*, wisdom assumes the role of a personal being. This is probably more than a metaphor, and goes to the heart of God’s true nature. Within the being of God there resides a personal expression of wisdom. In the New Testament, this takes the form of the *Logos* — the Word — who was responsible for the creation of the world and who later “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1-18). Even in the Old Testament, before wisdom’s connection with the coming of Jesus was clearly known, wisdom in the form of a woman takes on an enormous role, especially in Proverbs 8.

Already in 1:20-33 wisdom “calls aloud in the street,” giving a powerful speech directed at those who stand in need of her abilities.

Here, in 2:3, the student of wisdom is asked to “call” (*qār’ā*) out for understanding and insight — again using those words which have to do with the inner meaning of things. This emphasis on “calling” or “summoning” wisdom, makes wisdom an active experience, not a passive one. To call for wisdom is virtually equivalent to *calling on God*. “Call to me and I will answer you,” God tells His people, “and I will show you great and hidden things *which you do not yet know*” (Jeremiah 33:3). It also parallels what we find in James 1:5 where the believer who “lacks wisdom” is told to “ask God.”

4. Wisdom is something which a person must seek and toward which he must strive (2:4).

The summoning of wisdom is described in greater detail. The act of “seeking” (from the Hebrew *bāqāš*) involves: “earnest seeking, wanting to find.” It is common to find the word “to seek” alongside words for “pursue, ask, visit, choose.” The similes of “silver and hidden treasure” drive the passion of our search for

wisdom. The word for “hidden treasure” is *ḥapāš*, meaning “to disguise, hide so that it cannot be found.” The way the treasure is hidden strongly implies its *precious nature*. Nobody goes to the bother of hiding something that well, unless he doesn’t want something of great value to be found and stolen. At the same time, a certain *allure* is created by the act of hiding. The idea behind this word “to hide,” is “to have oneself searched for.” God embeds His deeper wisdom so that only those to whom it really matters will actually make the effort to find it. That is why Jesus used the popular aphorisms, “Do not give dogs what is holy; don’t cast your pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6). That is also why Jesus taught in parables: he wanted to hide true wisdom from those who cared little about it, but thereby made it available to those who truly sought it out. Wisdom is not spoon-feeding, nor does it have to do with the quick fix. In one sense, wisdom plays “hard-to-get,” not because it doesn’t want us to find it, but rather because it only wants those who really care about it. God has no interest in half-hearted attempts to have a relationship with Him. The prophet Malachi casts the father-son relationship in just such a framework, as he describes the meager acts of affection shown by God’s people to Him (Malachi 1:6-14).

A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' 7 By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. 8 When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. 9 And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. 10 Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. 11 For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. 12 But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. 13 But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. 14 Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.

5. The consequence of wisdom comes in the form of understanding: the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God (2:5).

At this point in the passage, we come to the *result* or *consequence* section, introduced by the particle *'āz*, “then.” To review, in 2:1-4 there are a series of “if” statements (Hebrew, *'im*) which form what is known as the *protasis* or conditional portion of the sentence. We now have the *apodosis* or consequence portion. This forms a classic “if-then” statement. The father offers to his son the *result* of making wisdom the number one priority in his education. Perhaps the son figured after all his hard work that the consequence would be special honors or a better job or simply high intelligence. But the father does not ask the son to value those things at all. Instead, he tells him that *understanding* “the fear of the Lord” and *insight* into “the knowledge of God” would be the outcome of his diligent efforts to experience wisdom. The goal of wisdom is God Himself, and a relationship with God. Such a result is dynamic, not static; living, not fossilized; personal, not abstract. Moreover, wisdom as “knowing God” means: the process of wisdom that is never finished, the depths are never reached, the treasures that are never exhausted, and the possibilities that are endless. Thinking about wisdom in terms of the “fear of the Lord” and “the knowledge of God” removes it from the realm of encyclopedic knowledge and places it into the school of life-long learning.

Wisdom results in continuing education not formal education. This is not to say that formal education does not belong in the mix. It certainly does, but not as the end-game. Perhaps this is why the writer of *Proverbs* prefers the metaphor of *treasure* when talking about wisdom: here is value and inexhaustible insight. Wisdom must be this way. Life is far too complex, and the choices we are called upon to make far too unpredictable to be captured between the pages of a single volume. Even Scripture does not see itself as a self-contained and closed system of truth. Rather, Scripture is the Word of God — the wisdom which continuously flows from the mouth of God. When we read Scripture, we are in communion with the living

God Who speaks with us, and whose words are ever and always taking on new life and fresh meaning. The words of Scripture are windows into the wisdom of God. Recall the words of Jesus:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me (John 5:39).

In 2:5, we read that we will “find” the knowledge of God. The Hebrew word for “find” is *matsa*: something “found” which had been “sought.” Elsewhere we are encouraged by the words, “Seek and you will find” (Jeremiah 29:13; Deuteronomy 4:29; Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9). Finding wisdom is the reward for seeking it. For to find wisdom in this way, is to find God.

6. Seeking wisdom really means seeking God (2:6).

In what follows, the writer intends to *personalize* the experience of wisdom even further. There is a distinctive change in personal pronouns at this point: away from “you,” in reference to the son; and toward “he,” directed on Yahweh. God is called “Yahweh who gives wisdom,” and does so “from His mouth” (Hebrew: *mippîw*). Behind the idea of words coming from God’s “mouth,” is the living, dynamic, and personal nature of wisdom. Prophets are said to “speak from the mouth of Yahweh” (2 Chronicles 36:12). The expression “mouth of Yahweh” occurs several times in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 8:3; Joshua 17:4; 2 Chronicles 36:12; Isaiah 1:20; 34:16; 40:5; 58:14; 62:2; Jeremiah 9:12; 23:16; Micah 4:4; 1 Kings 8:15; 2 Chronicles 6:4). Of these, the following are especially interesting:

And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD (Deuteronomy 8:3).

And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isaiah 40:5).

The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give (Isaiah 62:2).

Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD (Jeremiah 23:16).

When something comes “from the mouth of Yahweh,” it is certain, sound, true, and reliable. What God predicts comes to pass; what He promises, He fulfills; what He gives cannot be taken away. Wisdom rests on what God says. Wisdom *is* what God says. Moreover, when distressed persons like Job, reach out for hope in their trial, they “treasure the words of His mouth” (Job 23:12) and receive instruction in their hearts from “His mouth” (Job 22:22). All of creation exists because of “the breath of His mouth” (Psalm 33:6). Those who heard Jesus speak in the synagogue, marveled as “the words which were coming from his mouth” (Luke 4:22).

The human father has reached a decisive moment in the wisdom education of his son. Until now, the emphasis has been on the finding and discovering of a hidden treasure, namely, wisdom itself. The son looks hopefully for the uncovered treasure of wisdom. Then comes the great surprise: wisdom as a *what* turns into wisdom as a *who*. The father seems to be telling his son, “All along, I have been pointing you to wisdom, as toward a precious treasure waiting for you at the end of a long journey. At last you have arrived at your adulthood when the pursuit of wisdom will become your own responsibility. However, what you discover is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of wisdom. And that wisdom is to be found in knowing God Himself.”

7. God protects those who seek wisdom from Him (2:7-8).

Several key words stand out in these two verses, and they all have to do with *being secure*. Wisdom is God’s agent for protecting His people.

a. Shield: *māgēn*. A fairly frequent word (130 times), the main thought is “cover over” so as to shield from danger. The underlying verb is *gānan* and it is used of God’s protective guardianship of His

people when their enemies threaten them. Interestingly, another word in this family is *gan* which means “garden,” something that is protected by a wall or hedge. The literal “shield” (as used here) can also refer to anything or anyone offering a defense. In the ancient literature, we find instances of *māgēn* referring to the Great King who by covenant-treaty, promises to defend those under His rule. God is called “shield” in a number of places in the Old Testament (Genesis 15:1; Psalm 115:10; Deuteronomy 33:29; here; Proverbs 30:5)

- b. Guards: *nātzar*. The verb means to “watch over” and thereby “protect.” God keeps us “in view” and so stands guard over us. Wisdom keeps those who do not forsake her (Proverbs 4:6). So discretion watches over her children (Proverbs 2:11) and righteousness watches over her (Proverbs 13:6). Wisdom operates with 20/20 vision, is wide-angled, and sees both near and far. Things which threaten us are within wisdom’s field of vision. Often used of the ancient *watchman* who stands in the tower, ever-alert to an approaching threat, this verb appropriately applies to *wisdom* which faithfully appraises those who seek it of threatening dangers. That is, wisdom is never “caught off-guard,” but anticipates every possible eventuality. That’s what good guards do.
- c. Protects: *šāmar*. Another popular word in the Old Testament (420 times!). The emphasis is still on protection, nuanced with the idea of “exercising great care over,” “do carefully or diligently,” and “give heed to.” “Guarding oneself” is often a metaphor for strong *personal discipline*. Wisdom leads us to “heed our ways” (Psalm 39:2) and “guard our lips” (Proverbs 13:3). That is, we are to live life carefully, diligently, circumspectly, and thereby, wisely.

The particular emphasis is on protection as it has to do with righteousness and faithfulness. We read here about “the paths of justice,” from the Hebrew word *mišpāt* which has to do with deciding cases in a legal sense. Always in wisdom’s field of vision is the proper conduct of human beings before the court. The purpose of government, in Hebrew terms, is the maintenance of justice: making right what is wrong, straightening what is crooked, and promoting the circumstances under which good things happen to the people of God. Wisdom stands watch over God’s world, looking for places where it has gotten “out of joint,” or where it has become bent and no longer functioning as it should. Restoring the proper operation of society is part of wisdom’s role. When the father’s son is directed to wisdom — and thereby to God — he is called to become part of God’s solution to the world’s problems. That is, he is called to the business of protecting and promoting justice.

8. True maturity results in the love of a righteous world (2:9-10).

Three key words string together in 2:9: justice, judgment and equity. Taken together they “lead to the good.” We met these same terms in 1:3 (see previous *Background Notes*). At that time we noted that they had to do with the social purpose for the gift of wisdom. We are to become persons who care deeply about a world out of joint, the need for sound decisions affecting the public good, and fairness in the treatment of other human beings (and the planet as a whole). If we ask the leading question of this week’s study, “What Good is Wisdom to Me?” we are immediately drawn to the writer’s use of the word “good” in the phrase “every good path.” Literally, the Hebrew says that the love for a just world, in every way, leads to an *entrenchment* on the good path (*kāl-ma’gal-tôb*). This word, *ma’gal*, refers to an entrenchment or track, as one might find in pastureland or where cattle wore down the ground after constant, habitual use. Our idea of “cow-path” is meant. One of the blessings of wisdom is that it makes us committed to justice in such a way that it becomes a habit for us and part of our second nature. Instinctively, wisdom goes into action when it sees a wrong done or something in need of straightening. Since the ways of the Lord are right, anything which obscures, obstructs or alters those ways immediately become of interest to wisdom. Wise persons don’t need to be reminded about making wrong things right. It’s in their blood. Or, as the text tells us, these things will come “into your heart” and “be pleasant to your soul.” This last statement is better translated, “nestles in your soul.”⁶

⁶ Suggested by Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs. Vol. 22*. Word Biblical Commentary. Ed. Bruce M. Metzger, et. al. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 13.

9. Virtue is the first reward of wisdom (2:11).

Once more we have the Hebrew term *mizmāh* which means “purpose, discretion, device.” Commonly used of schemes or plots of an evil nature, in this case, the writer gives the positive meaning (see 1:4, and our *Background Notes* for the previous study). Wisdom brings with it a commitment to lay plans carefully in ways consistent with God’s overall purpose. Nothing we plan ought to be disconnected from what God wants for His world. To God belongs the big story, the meta-narrative. We are called to join our little stories to His. Doing this consistently and constantly leads to a life of virtue, lived with purpose and *discretion*.

The word “discretion” is usually used within the legal world where it has to do with a certain “leeway” permitted to a judge or magistrate when rendering a decision. Sometimes the *letter of the law* is trumped in favor of its *spirit*. In broader terms, discretion is about “freedom to judge on one’s own,” as opposed to judgments made under duress or coercion. Much of life falls outside the neat boundaries of written law. Decisions must still be made, however, affecting the thorny issues we face. Since *rules* can’t always decide, it turns out, *we* must. It falls to the truly wise person to decide under such circumstances. What the father promises his son, is that wisdom supplies discretion when such decisions threaten to undo him.

Wisdom, *hokmāh*, refers to social skill given by God to human beings showing them how to build a healthy society under God’s rule and not a lethal one under their own rule. Wisdom, in *Proverbs*, refers to shaping a God-honoring culture under God’s blessing, not one that stands under His curse.⁷ When the father instructs his son, he is acting for the good of all Israelite society by contributing to the growing number of wise sons in the kingdom.

Still, we might ask, why do we need *wisdom* if we already have *law*? Of course, the Hebrew idea of Torah is much larger than mere law, but also includes instruction and guidance. In a sense, Torah encompasses wisdom within its curriculum. However, the *Proverbs* take up social and cultural issues that are too fine to be caught in the mesh of the law, too small to be hit by the broadsides of even the prophets. What wisdom does for us is take the commandments of Torah and refine them, considering them in more nuanced terms. For example, the Ten Commandments tell us, “Do not Murder” (Exodus 20:13). This command is itself a further refinement of the statement, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Yet, wisdom wants more from us than “Do not murder” supplies. Wisdom tells us, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (Proverbs 25:21). Wisdom wants us to pay attention to the details — to the practical outworking of the larger matters. Wisdom forces us deep down into the warp and woof of human life, and rely on the insights and understanding of the “all wise God” to fix the problems when they are small, before they accumulate and aren’t manageable any longer even through law.

It’s really about the “broken window theory.”⁸

Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it’s unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside.

Or consider a sidewalk. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of trash from take-out restaurants there or breaking into cars.

Wisdom asks us to manage the world at the level of windows and sidewalks, honoring the people who own them, use them, and need them. The father in our proverb calls on his son to discover the God who cares deeply about His world and wants it to be right in every detail. Law alone is insufficient to straighten crooked things. For that we need wisdom. Wisdom which feeds enemies, honors others, is generous to the poor, protects other people’s reputations, and in essence goes beyond abstractions (“love your neighbor”) and beyond rules (“do not murder”).

⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, “Righteousness in Proverbs,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70 (2008): 228.

⁸ James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, “Broken Windows,” *Atlantic Monthly*, May (1982).

Perennial Dangers

In the Hebrew Bible, Proverbs 2:1-11 has many lines which begin with the Hebrew letter 'aleph (א), the very first letter of the alphabet. The section which follows, 2:12-22, has many lines which begin with the Hebrew letter lamed (ל), the middle letter of the alphabet. Scholars refer to these as the *aleph*-section and the *lamed*-section, respectively. The first is marked by conditional sentences (in the “if-then” form) beginning with א. The second is marked by purpose, result or consequence sentences beginning with ל. In effect, the father places his heavy-duty instruction at the beginning, but then tells his son about the “real world” of ever-present dangers, and that wisdom exists precisely to meet those challenges head-on. Just as wisdom cares about the *details* (see above), so it cares about the *dangers* which threaten God’s good world.

Two distinct “ways” are identified, both of them with a negative and destructive outcome. They are roads to nowhere because they start with the view from nowhere.⁹ Wisdom supplies the missing starting-point, and, in the end, becomes the climatic fulfillment-point. Any good father warns his son about the dangers up ahead. The father in Proverbs 2 is no exception. What we need to know is that wisdom isn’t naïve about the world, since it has a full grip on what’s above (God) and what’s below (earth, us). So what’s up ahead? Put succinctly, *evil men* and *evil women* are up ahead, and they are calling to us from roads which pretend to lead somewhere. On the surface, they appear to be fine walking paths which start out straight and smooth. Do they remain reliable footpaths? Our sage tells his son, they do not.

The Way of Evil Men (2:12-15)

The father in our proverb knows full well his son will probably end up on a bad road at sometime in his life. He wants his son to avoid this, but he’s a realist. That’s why he uses the Hebrew word *nātzal* which means “to snatch away, deliver, escape from, be torn or stripped away from.” Frankly, this is a pretty violent word, suggesting the need for sudden, quick-witted, and decisive choice. His son will need wisdom to snatch him away from a badly chosen road. Some element of foolishness remains in the son’s heart, no doubt, as he launches onto the sea of life. People lie in wait along the pathway, and they do not have his best interests at heart. Quite the contrary, they seek to plunder, manipulate, and otherwise take advantage of his youth and its inexperience. *What is wisdom good for in this case?* Obviously, it didn’t stop him from making the wrong turn and falling into company with some bad folk. What it does offer is “a way to escape,” and that is precisely what this Hebrew word suggests, though in a fairly violent way. Wisdom snatches our young son out of evil’s way by grabbing the back of his neck and yanking him to a better path and out of the disastrous one.

The road in question is called “The Way Evil” (*middereḳ rāʿ*). It even sounds nasty in Hebrew! We have similar terminology in Psalm 1:1:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in *the way of sinners*, nor sits in the seat of scoffers...

The idea of the evil way belongs to the Torah concept of “the two ways:”¹⁰ one of life and the other of death (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19; also, Jeremiah 21:8). In this case, the choice between the two ways rests with the son, and the father counsels him to rely on wisdom to help him decide. Following wisdom’s guidance is literally a matter of life and death.

Almost immediately, the writer tells us about the primary weapon in evil men’s arsenal: *words*. “Men of perverted speech,” is probably the best translation for this expression in the Hebrew: *mēʾiš mēḏabbēr taḥpūḳōt*.

⁹ Thomas Nagel popularized the phrase “View from Nowhere,” in his thoughtful treatment of the objective/subjective self in the book of the same name: *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Among the important works of Christian literature penned during the first century is *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, also known simply as the *Didachē*. The first six chapters of that work are devoted to the subject of “The Two Ways,” and it served as a manual of instructions for new converts in preparation for baptism.

Literally this says: “from a man speaking perverse things.” The word for “perverse” is a derivative of the verb form *hāpak* which means to “turn, overturn.” When applied to God, it refers to His judgment in “overturning” wicked persons or nations. Positively, the term describes God’s favorable actions when he “turns things around” in unexpected ways. In *Proverbs*, however, the connotation is negative and has to do with human beings perverting (turning around) things for their own selfish ends (23:33; here; 10:31-32; 16:30; 6:14; 16:30; among others). Our English word “perverse” or “perverted” usually means to take something good and turn it into something bad. Speech is in view here. Whereas wisdom uses speech to communicate the Word of God, men of the “evil way” twist the benevolent purpose into a malevolent one. Words are supposed to create, sustain, proclaim truth, utter praise, and otherwise express wisdom (more of this in our next study). However, the father’s son encounters a path where speech is the instrument for wicked goals. He must now rely on his father’s wisdom to counter perverse speech with wholesome communication.

Men of the evil way are regularly *unfaithful*. According to 2:13, they “forsake” righteous paths in order to walk in the paths of darkness. The Hebrew word translated “forsake” comes from the verb *‘āzab* meaning to “depart, abandon, and loose.” The notion is that of putting *distance* between oneself and “persons, places or objects.” It can also refer to moral defection in which a human being abandons a virtuous life and takes up a wicked one. *Proverbs* constantly warns its students about forsaking righteousness (here; 15:10), wisdom (4:2, 6), reproof (10:17), and loyalty/faithfulness (3:3). A severe warning comes from Scripture that if one abandons God, God will forsake him (2 Chronicles 12:1, 5; 15:2).¹¹

Of special concern is that wicked men of the evil way forsake “the right way” (*‘orhôt yōšer*) and choose the “way of darkness” instead. There is a contrast between the road well lit and open to full view, and the road marked by obscurity and concealment. Darkness existed before God spoke the first creative word, “Let there to light.” Darkness hides the mischief of human beings and tries to deceive others and God in the process. In 2:14, the writer explains why such men seek darkness: they wish to celebrate evil and its perversity.¹² The men of the evil way actually enjoy being evil; they consider evil to be good *for them*. However, to the son of a wise father, their “ways” are not in the darkness at all, but are revealed by the brilliant light of wisdom. When wisdom sees the hidden ways of darkness, it exposes them for what they are (2:15): 1) crooked, and 2) devious. Two Hebrew words express these ideas: *‘iqēš*, meaning “twisted” and *lūz*, meaning “turned aside, slip from sight.” Wicked men of the evil way want the freedom to twist the right way but they want to do so *without being detected*. They are, so to speak, moral cowards. Like Gollum in Tolkien’s epic or the shepherd in Gyges’ Ring, invisibility equates to invincibility. However, the wise son has been forewarned by his father’s instruction not to be fooled by the devious plans of such men who prefer darkness to light. Wise sons are “children of the light” (see Ephesians 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:5).

The Way of Evil Women (2:16-19)

Not all temptations of the evil way are alike. The writer first portrayed the more masculine features of *power* bent on evil intent. Among the abuses of our common humanity in the present day is that of power, what Nietzsche called “the will to power.” It cares nothing for the rules, but takes great pleasure in the feeling of its own masculine strength, whether mental or physical, to subvert righteousness. To such persons, “might makes right.” They don’t believe that the rules were made for them, but in fact imagine that it is they who *make the rules*.

However, *power* is not the only object of perversion. *Sex* is also susceptible of the same misuse. In this next section, the young son is warned about the wiles of *manipulated sexuality*. Freud imagined that human life was

¹¹ This is a controversial claim. The New Testament warns Christ followers about the consequences of “denying Christ” in the face of persecution. An illustration of this is 2 Timothy 2:11-13.

¹² John’s Gospel gives us a clear text in this regard: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out by God” (John 3:19-21).

shaped by sexual drives, fueled deep in the interior of the psyche by the famous *Id*. If Nietzsche thought, “It’s all about power,” then Freud thought, “It’s all about sex.” Our present culture has made big business out of sex, selling products and services based on their sexual appeal. In the passage before us, it appears that *woman* is singled out as the primary offender. To be honest, most societies throughout history have encouraged the exploitation of women. If there wasn’t a market for selling sex in a feminine package, the strategy would have failed a long time ago. The problem is one of collusion. Both men and women must agree to allow the sexual transaction to occur,¹³ and the writer of *Proverbs* knows this full well. He is not targeting women, but he is highlighting the vulnerability of both men and women to this collusion.

What then are the features of the sexual trap laid by woman in this section? Again, the writer uses the verb which means “to pluck, snatch, deliver, year oneself away from” (*nātsal*). The son constantly faces the temptations and requires firm action to remove himself from them. He then proceeds to describe the woman of the evil way with the phrase, *mēʔiššāḥ zārāḥ*, using the adjective which means “foreign, strange.” The idea is that the son has no covenant relationship with this woman, but she represents the anonymous and objectified feminine. Her identity is further reinforced with a word meaning “alien” (*nākār*) applied not only to the woman herself but also to what she says — to her speech. These words are further characterized as “smooth,” suggesting flattery: she tells the young man what he wants to hear, not what is true. The Hebrew used here actually means “to divide, share” but also has the other meaning of “slippery, smooth” (*ḥālaq*).

In the previous section, the evil man gains power by hiding his intentions through plots and schemes concocted in the darkness. Our female counterpart chooses a different approach: she is profuse with her words of overt praise and flattery, and thereby she achieves her intent of seduction. To her, everything is very much out in the open, though it is equally deceptive. She must flaunt into order to tempt; she must turn on the charms in order to entice. She achieves her vicious intent through *sweet allure*, whereas the evil man accomplishes his through *scheming assault*.

Like her male counterpart, the evil woman is also faithless. The language of the text reveals that she forsakes her marital covenant in order to do what she does. *Proverbs* takes the marriage relationship seriously, not only here, but through its wise counsels. Here the writer makes crystal clear that by stepping outside the boundaries of her marriage and enticing other men, the woman has broken “the covenant of her God” (*ḅərīt ʔēlōheḥā*). Wisdom recognizes that marriage is not just a two-party relationship but also involves as its principal partner, God Himself. The Hebrew text leaves no doubt about that when it speaks of “her God.” Interestingly, it does not say “her *husband*,” though the ancient world might expect to read that here. The young son who hears her flattering words needs to know that he is playing with fire: this woman who claims to “want him” is in serious trouble with God by stepping out on her own marriage. Nothing about this seduction is either good or wise. Only wisdom can help the young man see this prevarication and then take steps to quickly leave.

We are reminded of the story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar:

⁶ So he [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him [Joseph] he had no concern about anything but the food he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. ⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." ⁸ But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. ⁹ He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. ¹¹ But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, ¹² she caught

¹³ The notable exception to this is, of course, the world-wide trafficking of the sex trade. The young men and women sold into such slavery hardly give consent, and what happens to them is not the result of their collusion but of those who exploit them. For an analysis of this problem and some constructive proposals for remediation, see Siddharth Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house (Genesis 39:6-12).

Joseph reveals his wisdom in refusing the woman's advances. He sizes up the relevant issues, his special place in Potiphar's house, and the fact of the woman's marriage. Honestly and faithfully Joseph reminds her: "You are his wife." With godly fear, he affirms "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" Notice how the woman uses *words*: "She spoke to Joseph day after day." Notice how Joseph resists: "He would not listen to her." Though his situation deteriorated because of her untruthfulness, God eventually vindicated his faithfulness. Joseph was the true son of wisdom.

The wise father counsels his son about the *consequences* of yielding to the evil woman's smooth words. If the path she walks is paved with smooth words, they slide inevitably down to death. According to 2:18, "her house sinks down to death, ... to the departed." The Hebrew verb *šāḥaḥ* means "to bow down, bring low, be abased." Whatever "high" the son might experience from a brief tryst with her, he and she together will face the terrifying descent into the shadowy world of the afterlife, and from there, no one comes back (2:19). At least two things are in view: 1) the likely wrath of her husband when he finds out; 2) the health risks associated with sexually transmitted disease. The book of *Proverbs* is well-aware of both, as these passages reveal: 6:34 and 9:13-18.

We find a clear contrast between Woman Wisdom and Woman Wickedness in Proverbs 9:1-18. What the father tells his son in the current section he will reinforce in the later passage. Here is a concise summary:

¹⁷ "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." ¹⁸ But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol (9:17-18)

The evil woman has her own proverb: "stolen water is sweet; bread eaten in secret is pleasant." What she fails to accept is the consequence which takes her and her "guests" down into the place of the death. Wisdom is good for the son *because it reminds him about the consequences of his choices and actions*.

The Way of the Good; the Path of the Righteous (2:20-22)

Sharply contrasted with the evil way of man and woman is the two-fold path of "the good ones" and "the righteous ones." The nouns are in the plural, suggesting that *persons* are in view. Companionship on the journey of wisdom involves traveling with the good and the righteous. The writer places these two features in parallel.

"Good," from the Hebrew *tôb*, emphasizes the general state of well-being. If something is in good working order, functioning properly, it is said to be "good." There are distinctions made among different kinds of good things: 1) practical or material good; 2) beauty or pleasantness; 3) quality or value; 4) morality; 5) technical or philosophical. Throughout *Proverbs*, wisdom is credited with promoting goodness in all its forms, and human beings are instructed to *do good* and *be good* through wise counsel (see the usage: 2:9; here; 3:4, 14, 27; 4:2; 8:11, 19; 11:10, 23, 27; 12:2, 9, 14, 25; 13:2, 15, 21; 14:14, 19, 22; 15:3, 15-17, 23, 30; 16:8, 16, 19-20, 29, 32; 17:1, 13, 20, 26; 18:5, 22; 19:1-2, 8, 22; 20:23; 21:9, 19; 22:1, 9, 13, 23, 25; 25:7, 24-25, 27; 27:5, 10; 28:6, 10, 21; 31:12, 18). Often the idea of "better" is simply derived from the word "good." Translations will use "better" when the underlying term is actually "good." For example, 16:16 says, "How much better to get wisdom than gold!" The underlying Hebrew says, "To acquire wisdom — how [what] good by comparison with gold!" That is, "the good" of wisdom is superior to "the good" of gold.

"Righteous," from the Hebrew *tsaddîq*, means, as we have noted many times, that which is "right, straight."

Goodness and righteousness are paths we walk as wise persons. These qualities reliably bring us to the place where God wants us to be. The obedient son of the wise father will find his way home to God if he follows them. Wisdom *makes us* good and *makes us* righteous. Wisdom doesn't just teach us to *do* good and *do* righteous things. Isolated acts of goodness or righteousness do not comprise a good and righteous life. What wisdom seeks is not just a change in *conduct* but also a change in *character*. That's what wisdom is "good for."

According to 2:21, another outcome of the wise son is *permanence and stability*. Once more, the place we end up is determined by the sort of person we are. The writer refers to such persons as “upright” and “those with integrity.” The Hebrew concepts behind those words have to do with “wholeness and completeness” of character. The upright person *wants to make wrong things right*. The person of integrity exhibits a coherence and completeness in his character. He “stays the course” and doesn’t veer wildly across the path he walks. He has a steady step, not constantly changing directions or getting lost along the way because he decided to find a “shortcut.” Watching such a person, others gain confidence in both him and in the life he models. “There’s someone we can trust,” they say. “There’s a person we’d like to be.” By contrast, 2:22 reminds us, the perverse man or woman who prefers “doing it my way,” discovers the deadly pitfalls and the untimely end to the journey. The writer uses strong language when he says that they will be “uprooted from the land.” Persons with shallow roots to begin with are most likely to be uprooted.

Helping Us Not to Forget (3:1-6)

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, ² for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. ³ Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

“Do not forget *my Torah*.” That’s what 3:1 says in the Hebrew text. This important Hebrew word isn’t just about law or rules, but extends to guidance and instruction. The word “teaching” probably narrows the focus too much, inasmuch as the father is communicating more than ideas: he is seeking to make his son *wise* so that his son’s “heart” will “keep” the *mitztôth* — “the commandments.” Mere outward conformity of actions to rules is not the goal of wisdom. Transformation of heart so that it is loyal to wisdom is the true purpose of wisdom. Consistency of life leads to constancy of life (3:2).

Once more, the theme of faithfulness dominates the text. The father tells his son to value two features in 3:3: 1) “steadfast love,” from the Hebrew word *hesed* — the main term for covenant loyalty; and, 2) “truth,” from the Hebrew word *emet* — the usual term for “truth,” but in the sense of “being true,” or being faithful. In effect, he is telling his son that he lives under a solemn covenant with its twin requirements of covenant love and devotion. Wisdom is about engendering commitment. All around the young man are idols which seek his worship and which seek to lure him away from single-hearted devotion to Yahweh, his God. Directly associated with this features are twin-actions: 1) bind; 2) write. They are, in one sense, metaphors for faithfulness.

Now the idea of placing something around one’s neck carries both a promise and a threat. We tend to wear things around our necks that are precious to us, and which we wish to carry close to our hearts. Others can see them there as well. More somberly, the neck is also the place of vulnerability, especially to law-breakers who hang from the gallows. The neck is the place of labor, for on it rests the oxen’s yoke. It is also the place where enemies place their foot as a sign of defeat. Necks can stiffen and be resistant to training, as in “a stiff-necked people” (2 Chronicles 36:13; Proverbs 29:1; Jeremiah 7:26, 23; 19:15). To “bind,” in the sense suggested by the Hebrew word *qāšar*, speaks of something *inseparable*. Wisdom does not allow its words to be easily loosed. Just as the neck supports the head in its vital role as agent of vision, speech, and perception, so the words of the wise father are to be the agents of spiritual vision, speech and insight.

More faithful still is the *writing on the tablet of the heart* (see also 7:3). The Hebrews cherished the tablets written by “the finger of God” which gave them Torah. The ancient world relied on oral traditions and living memories to preserve its stories. When it came to official matters, however, something more reliable was needed. Thanks to archaeology, scores of tablets have been uncovered documenting a network of ancient

treaties and commercial arrangements connecting different regions of the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁴ No less than two copies of major agreements were made, making sure that the exact wording and precise conditions of the contracts were corroborated. Therefore, when the writer of *Proverbs* chooses the phrase “tablet of the heart,” he is using language which emphasizes the reliability of the father’s words on his son’s heart. The son must faithfully corroborate with his heart and life the wisdom of his father. Later writers would take up such language as they look forward to the day when God’s word would be inscribed in human hearts:

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33).

That passage would later be quite in the New Testament, in Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16, and applied to the new covenant brought by Jesus Christ.

Paul would later echo this hopeful situation in light of Christ’s coming:

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3)

Wisdom shapes human lives through human hearts. The father calls on his son to make a commitment to wisdom and to commit wisdom to his heart. He must have a relationship with wisdom which reaches deep into the heart; a lasting relationship with wisdom bound by sacred covenant.

In 3:4, the writer explains what the son can expect if he makes this commitment to wisdom. The result of wisdom applied to the heart takes the form of a fresh discovery by the son. Using the Hebrew verb *mātzā’* the writer conveys the idea of “reach, attain, come, or arrive.” This is not a passive discovery but the outcome of a process in which the son has long been engaged. From his early days, the son has accepted instruction from the father in wisdom. By making a life-long commitment to that pursuit, the son can anticipate certain things will happen: 1) he will arrive at favor (*hēn*); 2) he will acquire skill (*śēkel*) in goodness. And, he will attain these things with both God and other people.

The biblical idea of “favor” usual refers to God’s covenant favor extended to His people based on the terms of His covenant with them. In *Proverbs*, the word for favor appears some thirteen times with special emphasis on “beauty” and “acceptance from peers.” The writer, in 3:4, connects these with skills in goodness, and then applies them both to “God and others.” A life of favor and goodness is a sign of wisdom’s effectual work. Who we are and what we can do are both impacted when wisdom is given free rein. The son is being told about the benefits of making a commitment to wisdom. He can expect to meet with spiritual success. This takes shape in his dealings with God and other people where he discovers a liberating *competence* (skill) as a human being. He becomes capable of things otherwise inaccessible.

When we reach 3:5-6, the moment of decision has arrived for the son, and the father invites him to make a life-long commitment to his covenant Lord. Wisdom ceases to be an impersonal exercise in education and becomes a personal decision.

Action: Trust Object: in the Lord Manner: with all your heart	Action: Lean not Object: on your own understanding
Action: Acknowledge Object: Him Manner: in all your ways	
Promise: He will make straight your paths.	

¹⁴ See Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). Earlier, G.E. Mendenhall, “Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East,” *Biblical Archaeologist*, XVII (1954), 26-46, 49-76.

As this table suggests, the main action required of the son is *trust*. The root word is *bātaḥ* which means to experience well-being and safety as a result of placing confidence in someone or something. In related languages, such as Arabic, special emphasis falls on firmness or solidity. The Old Testament contrasts reliance on God with reliance on human or impersonal sources of confidence. Further insight into the meaning comes from our text in the verb “lean,” used with the negative particle. The Hebrew word *šā’an* refers to resting on something (or someone) for support, often used for the pillars of a building but also for a person leaning on a walking staff. This latter meaning fits the context of someone walking through life on the paths (ways, roads) laid out by God. Further, the verb “acknowledge” is used, based on the Hebrew root *yāda’*, the usual word “to know.” Literally, the son is told to “know God in all your ways.” This kind of knowledge is not merely intellectual, nor is the exercise of knowing God simply a matter of outlining certain facts about Him. The father invites his son to make a life-long commitment to have an intimate relational knowledge of God.

In practical terms, wisdom has been the source of instruction for the father’s son. The time has come for the son to make a commitment to God. This commitment involves full confidence in God’s direction, placing the full weight of his life on Him, and seeking a deep relationship with Him which permeates every aspect of his being. This is true wisdom. Nothing escapes the relationship the son has with God: every path he takes, every decision he makes, every idea he entertains, and every plan he lays must take God into consideration. Nothing in life is irrelevant to God, and nothing in life is immune to God’s involvement. The time has come for wisdom to saturate the heart of the father’s son. The time has arrived for God to assume the role of father in the son’s life.

God promises to “straighten” the paths which the son walks. A long-standing translation of this passage says that God will “direct your paths.” However, the underlying Hebrew uses the word *yāšar* which has to do with making things “right” or “straight.” The true follower of God’s wisdom never leaves the world as he finds it. This is not a matter of finding a road to walk like reading a map where all the paths are laid out and a person simply follows what’s shown to him. Some roads in the world are not worth following *as they are right now*. Most are crooked, pot-holed, and damaged. Some are impassable while others are dead-ends. True wisdom doesn’t just help us find the best road among a few poor choices. Instead, true wisdom engages us to help fix the roads we walk, knowing that others will need to follow us on them someday. A powerful passage from Isaiah — a Messianic prophecy — illustrates this process:

³ A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain (Isaiah 40:3-4)

Notice the strong action words commanded by “the voice”: “prepare, make straight, lift up, make low, level.” Wisdom requires of the son more than *finding* a way in the wilderness. Wisdom cries out and asks the son to become involved in *making* a way in the wilderness.

Concluding Thoughts

What good is wisdom — to me? After studying these two passages in *Proverbs*, it becomes evident that wisdom is a transformational dynamic in human life. Whatever wisdom touches it changes, whether persons, paths, or problems. Wisdom begins in the home, from parent to child, and then reaches into the world where crooked things get straightened and wrong things are made right. Wise persons place their trust in God alone, recognizing that only in Him can we have supreme confidence. Through wisdom we discover security, safety, and well-being. Wisdom always looks beyond itself and sees itself as the *instrument* of transformation which leads others to God and into the *intimacy* of transformation. As we observed in our previous study, wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, and that involves a relationship with a reliable God — One on whom we can fully lean and through whom we can fully live.

No, we cannot do it “my way,” as liberating as that prospect might seem to us. Private ways are fraught with miscalculation and delusion. “My way” may end up becoming the road to nowhere. “My way” may ultimately

leave everyone else out of the journey. That's not an option in a world which has become increasingly interconnected and interdependent. Whatever good wisdom does for "me" it simultaneously requires that I do the same for others.

Let us not forget the words of the Gospel as it speaks about God's *new wisdom*, fresh from the mouth of Jesus:

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

The writer of *Proverbs* would have been at home with those words. As the father of a son, he knew the responsibility he had to nurture wisdom and to help his son choose the right *way*. When Jesus came, he taught as one who was the Sage of God's subversive wisdom. Human wisdom was overturned, and new wisdom spoke with powerful clarity to a generation of Jewish people. "I am the way" sounds strangely familiar, in light of this week's study. The way of Jesus is rooted in the true wisdom of God. Jesus is the true wisdom. And it promises to bring life to a dying world. This is the Father's way for it brings us to the Father's house (see 14:1).

He is the way, without him there is no going. He is the truth, without him is no knowing. He is the life, without him there is no living. Jesus is the wisdom that is good for us — and for the world.

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: *Get Smart: What Good is Wisdom to Me?*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Get Smart: What Good is Wisdom to Me?* carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. As you read the title of this week's study, consider: What does Scripture teach is "good for us"? (Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 8:28; Deuteronomy 6:24; Hebrews 12:10). How is wisdom good for us? How does this differ from what our consumer society says is good for us?
2. Read the main text, Proverbs 2:1-22. Break this passage into the following sections and label each one with its key idea: 2:1-11; 2:12-15; 2:16-19; 2:20-22.
3. A series of "if" statements appear in 2:1-4, followed by some "then" statements in 2:5-11. What do the "if" statements *require*, and what do the "then" statements *promise*?
4. List and discuss the specific instructions of father to son. How is this passage an invitation to spiritual education? What *good* does the father tell his son will come from following his words of wisdom (2:1)?
5. What attitude of the son is required to maximize the benefits of his father's wisdom (2:2)?
6. In what sense must we "take the initiative" if we are to be enriched by wisdom (2:3-4)? What can hinder that process (also, see Malachi 1:6-14)?
7. What are the immediate benefits which come from wisdom, according to 2:5? Explain the key words in this verse. Refer to last week's study and review the meaning of "the fear of the Lord."
8. In what sense is "seeking wisdom" identical to "seeking God" (2:6). What does God promise in return for those who seek wisdom from Him (2:7-8)?
9. According to 2:9-10, what will a wise person want for the rest of the world? What quality does wisdom produce in us which helps put this desire into action (2:11)?
10. What two kinds of dangers face the father's son in 2:12-19? How are each of these unique, and what specific temptations do they introduce? How does wisdom benefit the son in his battle with these dangers?
11. In 2:20-22, the writer tells us about "the way of the good." What is it, and how do we stay faithfully on it? How do goodness and righteousness, the fruits of wisdom, benefit us?
12. The second passage for this week's study is Proverbs 3:1-6. Carefully read it, and then identify the main instructions the father gives his son. What seems to be the key command which gives unity to all the others?
13. What specific virtues (permanent character traits) does this passage emphasize, and how do they become a consistent part of our lives? Why does the writer speak of "the tablet of the heart" (see also 7:3). How is something written on the heart? (see also Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16; 2 Corinthians 3:3). Discuss this concept in light of Jesus and the Gospel.
14. What does it mean for wisdom to give us "favor and skill in goodness" (3:4)? Define "favor" as it is used here, and then suggest ways that wisdom makes favor and goodness possible in our lives.
15. Give special attention to 3:5-6. We suggest that you memorize these verses. List the verbs, their objects, and any modifiers. Explain each verb and why the writer included it. What is the relationship between "trust," "acknowledge," and "lean"?
16. How should we "acknowledge" God "in all our ways"? Give some specific examples from your own life where you have applied this wise principle. How was wisdom "good for you" when you did? In what new ways might you apply it?
17. What promise does God make to those who obey the commands in 3:5-6? Is there a difference between *finding* a straight path and *making* one?