

# FATHER KNOWS BEST

By Steve Zeisler

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Two weeks ago I was a guest at the marriage ceremony of Steve and Dana Carlson. Rich Carlson, my good friend who has been on the pastoral staff here for years, was performing the wedding of his son. Sitting next to my 17-year-old daughter I was particularly attentive, anticipating the future. The occasion repaid all the attention; it was a glorious experience. A loving father, a man of genuine character, was speaking to his son for whom he cared deeply. They laughed and hugged one another. Rich opened the Scriptures and spoke practically, honestly, clearly, and profoundly to his son and new daughter-in-law about God's word and His place in their lives.

They were surrounded by friends whose friendship was mature and filled with the presence of the Lord. Steve and Dana had passed out a bulletin to all those who came to the wedding that talked a bit about what was taking place. In it they had written a paragraph about each of the attendants in the wedding. Let me read to you what Steve Carlson wrote about the groomsman standing beside him, Steve Gruelle. This is what he wrote:

I met Steve at a PBC summer camp in 1982. Steve and I would qualify for a modern-day odd couple. He is very much a night person, I am a morning person. He likes Pepsi, I like Diet Coke. He does a lot of thinking, and I'm always talking too much. He drives a truck, I work on a sports car. He is semi-messy, while I am semi-clean. Steve makes killer cookies, and I do my best to eat all of them. But by the grace of God Steve and I are undeniably best friends. We love loud music and fast cars and have been roommates for three of the last four years. In reference to the eternal things in life, Steve has modeled to me patience, sensitivity toward others, and the ability to be peaceful in the midst of strife. Thanks, Stevo. I love you, man!

The young man and his bride were building a marriage upon a godly heritage. They were looking forward to a joyful future. The bride was radiant, and the groom was caring. God's presence was everywhere in the occasion, and there was almost no religion. The entire congregation of guests sang a marvelous hymn in praise of God. Then we were ushered out with Glenn Pickett in all his glory playing Scott Joplin ragtime. It was a beautiful occasion, because one generation learned lessons that God had taught them about life, and they were able to pass them on to the next generation.

Thinking about my own children, I was struck with longing that they might have a similar path before them in life, but also with a sense of sadness, because we live in a day and age in which all the things that make Steve and Dana so healthy are being undermined as our culture deteriorates.

## Life Skills

Making life-enhancing choices is what the Bible calls wisdom, sometimes defined as "the skill of living life." We begin here a study in the book of Proverbs, the centerpiece of the wisdom literature of the Bible. Proverbs' practicality also makes it a wonderful vehicle for evangelism. We have a wealth of knowledge that we can make available to the desperate world around us. I'm sure Steve and Dana's wedding did more to attract those non-Christians present to Christ than ninety percent of the things we do that are focused on sharing our faith. So this wisdom literature can become an open door for us to reach out to other people, and as they discover that there's a way to live that makes sense, they may very well discover the One who created it. I am hopeful that as we study Proverbs together we can look for ways not just to benefit ourselves from what we learn, but to reach out to others.

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Let me give you an outline of the book. The first verse of Proverbs 1 declares that these are "the proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel." Now the portion of this book that actually belongs to Solomon doesn't start until chapter 10, but because he is the greatest figure in human history when it comes to the collecting of wisdom and insight about life, his name is put here at the front of the book. What intervenes between the beginning of chapter 1 and chapter 10 is a marvelous course in which a father teaches his son some basic truths about life, so that, presumably, after learning these, the son will be ready to learn from the sayings of Solomon, the single-verse proverbs that make up most of the rest of the book. The last two chapters of the book were not written by Solomon, either. They were written by a man named Auger and a man named Lemuel. There is a section in chapter 25 that contains sayings of Solomon collected and edited by Hezekiah. There's another section where some unnamed wise men contribute some things, too. But by and large the majority of the material is Solomon's.

Let's read the first seven verses of Proverbs:

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:  
To know wisdom and instruction,  
To discern the sayings of understanding,  
To receive instruction in wise behavior,  
Righteousness, justice and equity;  
To give prudence to the naive,  
To the youth knowledge and discretion,  
A wise man will hear and increase in learning,  
And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,  
To understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles.  
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;  
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

## **What To Expect**

A series of expectations is laid before us in these opening verses. What is the point of all this? Well, in verse 2 one of the points is to know what people say: when you hear declarations or pronouncements made, when politicians give speeches, when educators issue statements, when your child brings home homework from school that has someone's opinion laced throughout it---whenever you hear something said, you ought to be discerning. If you are a wise person, you'll be able to cut through to what's true and reject what isn't, to label things for what they are and not be caught in schemes others devise. One of the things that studying this literature does for us is to make us capable of discerning sayings of understanding, to be good listeners.

Verse 3 suggests that we ought to be able to act rightly as well, not to just think and listen with discernment. We'll receive instruction in wise behavior, in righteousness, justice, and equity. So we become people who know what to do in any given situation; we know what is just, what is righteous, what pleases God. We are able to bring balance, we're able to think of alternatives and act in such a way that other people are helped and God is honored by our behavior, and we're not caught in things that are wrong or destructive.

Verse 4 talks about having something to teach those who are naive, who have not grown yet, who come behind us.

Verse 5 reminds us that this process goes on throughout a lifetime. We never cease learning. The acquisition of wisdom is an enterprise that will never become obsolete. There is always more to see and deeper purpose to gain.

After this series of expectations is laid before us, verse 7 announces the heart of the book. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." This statement is repeated (with some differences) in Proverbs 9:10. It is also mentioned in the Psalms, and Job gives us virtually the same sentence. This announcement must be understood and agreed with in order for everything else to make sense.

If you don't begin here you won't proceed anywhere worth going. Verse 7 makes two very important points, one to believers, those who are expected to be in agreement with what they're learning here, and another to those who are expected to be in disagreement.

## **Heart of the Lord**

The first statement, to believers, is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning point for knowledge, wisdom, growth, and understanding. It is not acknowledgement of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom, nor enthusiasm for the Lord. It is not even gratitude to the Lord that is the beginning. Those are all good things; they are commended elsewhere in scripture. We should acknowledge God in everything. We should be enthusiastic about the person and work of Christ and the character of God. We should be deeply grateful for all that we've received. But learning to live life skillfully, being able to go out into the real world and knowing how to get along with people, how to handle money, what makes a marriage work, how to raise your children, how to be a good neighbor, how to effectively enter into all the ordinary stuff of which life is made, requires as the beginning point fear of the Lord.

We should have an abiding concern that we never do anything to displease the Lord. That's what it means to fear the Lord. There is no setting aside of our God or his purposes. He cannot be contained somewhere---in the church, Bible study, or prayer meeting---and excluded from our day-to-day lives. And the notion that he might not be pleased should weigh heavily upon us. Hebrews 12 is a powerful statement of this point: "You have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind...But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem..." (12:18, 22.) It's a serious enough business to go to Mount Sinai. But in fact you've come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, and the blood of Christ. "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire." (12:28.) It is that sense of the importance of all this; it should matter to us that life is important to God, that we are important to him, that he knows, understands, and sees us. That's the essential beginning point to the acquisition of wisdom.

## **Regard For Rewards**

There's a good reason for that. The book of Proverbs and indeed all of the wisdom literature in the Bible explicitly and regularly talks about rewards that you can expect for the choices you make. If you learn to live wisely, the legitimate expectation is that you'll live long, you'll be more secure, you're likely to do well financially, you're apt to have better friends, your family life will be more pleasant. We're told later in Proverbs that the world was created with wisdom. This beautiful woman, Lady Wisdom, is the handmaiden of God. Everything in creation conforms to what is wise, and as we get in line with the way things really are, we learn to avoid pitfalls, we don't do stupid things, we don't make a mess of our lives, we choose good companions, and so on. Therefore, life becomes more enjoyable. But let me again warn you that every time you read this kind of material, the easy temptation is going to be to look forward to the advantages. I want to be wise because I want a happy home. Then the focus becomes the happy home. And then the happy home should be happier than it is, and we don't want difficult or unpleasant people around. We focus more on isolation and self-fulfillment, become ingrown, and so forth. The problem is that we will want the rewards instead of the One who gives them. We'll begin to appreciate the creation more than the Creator. We begin to settle into appreciation of the rewards and forget the whole beginning point, the whole consuming fire, the nature of God and his sovereignty. That's why the essential starting point is fear of the Lord.

We must look beyond wisdom literature and remind ourselves that our God has the right to make us insecure if he chooses, to put us in danger. He has the right to require of us things that are difficult and unexpected. We can't hold on to anything too tightly. And if we fear the Lord we may either receive the benefits or not as seems best to him.

Now the second part of verse 7 is also very important. It is addressed to those who are not expected to be persuaded by this. "Fools despise wisdom and instruction." The point here is that there is no plan B. There is no alternative source for wisdom and instruction. And that's a very important point as well because most

modern humanism, most intellectual arrogance has as its assumption, "I can grow wise other ways. I'm smart, savvy, aggressive, and capable." But the alternative to the first line in verse 7 is foolishness and the rejection of wisdom, not discovery of wisdom elsewhere.

## **A Father's Word**

I want to introduce the father teaching his son in this passage, or to be generic, the parent teaching a child. It's really one generation passing on life to another generation here. I think it is helpful to focus on fathers and sons, though, because even the secular world today recognizes the absolutely desperate fatherlessness of children taking place in this country.

Verses 8-19:

Hear, my son, your father's instruction,  
And do not forsake your mother's teaching;  
Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head,  
And ornaments about your neck.  
My son, if sinners entice you,  
Do not consent.

If they say, "Come with us,  
Let us lie in wait for blood,  
Let us ambush the innocent without cause;  
Let us swallow them alive like Sheol,  
Even whole, as those who go down to the pit;  
We shall find all kinds of precious wealth,  
We shall fill our houses with spoil;  
Throw in your lot with us,  
We shall all have one purse,"  
My son, do not walk in the way with them.

Keep your feet from their path,  
For their feet run to evil,  
And they hasten to shed blood.  
Indeed, it is useless to spread the net  
In the eyes of any bird;  
But they lie in wait for their own blood;  
They ambush their own lives.  
So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence;  
It takes away the life of its possessors.

The content of the father's message is extraordinarily helpful. His first word to his son is the observation that sometime in adolescence the offer will be made to him to join some sort of peer group that will give him identity and a sense of power. He goes on to say early gratification down this path leads to eventual destruction. Now the wonderful thing here is not just what the father says to his son, but the fact that he's saying it. It's the fact of the relationship, with time taken for communication, that saves the son as much as the practical content of what he says. Both are important. This is a father who has chosen to love his son, and his son will listen because of that relationship, and the specific advice is therefore helpful.

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The first offer made by the dangerous companions is power. That appeal is really what explains the dramatic

concern even among secular people for boys who don't have father figures, especially those in urban settings. Boys without access to healthy models and opportunity for experiencing competence have tremendous insecurity inside. And insecurity, fear, and powerlessness cause these sorts of offers to look attractive. The first offer is just the sheer possibility of violence. "Come with us! We can hurt somebody, some innocent victim, somebody who's weaker than we are." There's a sense of power that goes with being able to be violent. One of the blights on modern society today is youth gangs that exist everywhere. They are growing at a phenomenal rate. They represent exactly this kind of band of companions that is described here, and one of the things they exist for is to commit violence because it feels powerful.

The second offer made to the young man is that he'll get rich, which is another form of power. They'll steal what they don't have and glory in what they acquire.

The last appeal is that there will be a community of them; they'll all be in it together.

All of these offers will be attractive to a young man, a boy who doesn't have some other insight as to where to gain personal authority, power, and inner security. A healthy way to gain them is from your father who has taught you how to be a man.

### **Wisdom in the Streets**

The last section of chapter 1 introduces us to a woman. Let's briefly consider verses 20-23:

Wisdom shouts in the street,  
She lifts her voice in the square;  
At the head of the noisy streets she cries out;  
At the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings:  
"How long, O naive ones, will you love simplicity?

And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing,  
And fools hate knowledge?  
Turn to my reproof,  
Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you;  
I will make my words known to you.

In Proverbs wisdom is always figured as a woman, Lady Wisdom. Now the writer of Proverbs at this point is setting up this woman in direct contrast to the band of companions that have been speaking to this youth. This adolescent boy is bouncing along in life, trying to make sense of things, and he hasn't had a lot of experiences yet. He runs into this group of thugs who say, "Come join us. We'll all be in this together. We'll beat people up and steal money, rampage, and commit violence." There's a lot of energy, excitement, and connectedness. But then you have this other individual, Lady Wisdom, saying, "Come listen to me," only what she offers is the opposite of instant gratification. She is saying, "Come and listen to my reproof, my correction. It's going to be a lot harder, and the payoff won't come until much later."

The interesting thing to me is that both are in the street. The gang clearly is, but so is wisdom. This is not some kind of religious truth that you go into a religious building or a circle of believing people to hear things about God that have no application. This wisdom is practical. Wisdom is out in the streets, and she says, "Come here, I can teach you how to live. I can talk about how to make your way, how to make choices. I can teach you to be a man. I can teach you to be strong, capable, and effective in the real world. But it's harder to learn, and you're going to have to admit that you're a fool sometimes. You're going to have to learn some hard lessons." So the father is saying, "Listen, son, you've got one group over here offering quick gratification, but the end is destruction; or you've got another companion who will walk with you for the rest of your life." That is why the book of Proverbs is so helpful; it talks about real life, real attractions, real temptations, and real struggles.

### **A Father's Lesson**

I spent yesterday with a group of men and their sons from this church and other churches. Once a year the Christian Service Brigade has what they call Father-Son Team Day. You go away for a day and have archery contests and canoe races, throw frisbees through hula hoops, and so forth; games (including Bible verse memorization) you play with your son to get points. At the end of the day there's a speaker who talks about how God figures in family life. It's a very healthy provision in this busy society for a father to get away with his boy.

There was one man whose boy and mine were in the same age group, so we kept going to the same events at the same time. I stood next to him a few times and started talking to him. He made it clear right away where he stood: "I'm not religious, my ex-wife is the religious one. She talked me into coming up here with him." He was very leery about memorizing the verse, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength..." It was overcast, the wind blowing, and freezing cold, yet he wore big sunglasses the whole day. The guy didn't seem to want anybody getting too close, and he didn't want to look like he was getting into the spirit of the day.

Then we came to the archery session. It turned out that he was quite accomplished at archery. Now his son was a very slightly built, skinny guy. Every time the wind blew he seemed to rattle a bit. This kid could barely pull the bow back, and his dad was giving him a lot of instruction. The first time he fired the bow, the arrow went over the bale. But by his third shot he actually scored a perfect bull's eye, right in the heart of the target. And his father just melted.

It seemed very clear to me, watching them, that they didn't get to interact very much. The kid was nine years old, the parents were split up, the mother was raising the boy, she was religious, the father was not. He and his boy were kind of trying to make it work, but there wasn't any kind of easy camaraderie between them. But in this one experience the father had taught his son something, and the son had learned it. They suddenly became favorites to win the trophy for the archery event. The rest of the afternoon, he was a different guy because he had had the experience of giving something to his son. Archery might not be a skill you use a lot in life, but he got to be a real father. And his son appreciated him. His response to the other men began to change. He began to be open to the possibility of training his son in other things, even expressing some interest in the spiritual side of life.

We live in a dangerous world. Many of us have hurting families and weren't given a lot ourselves. We don't want our children to suffer for our hurt. We want to become good parents, good neighbors, good workers. Hopefully we'll take advantage together of the wisdom that is provided in the book of Proverbs, beginning with fear of the Lord, not only for our sakes but also for the sakes of people who are on the outside looking in.

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