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March 3rd: Proverbs 2 & Romans 15

March 2, 2021



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A formative education that will deliver the son who heeds it from danger. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 2. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright. He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, and watching over the way of his saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice, and equity, every good path.

For wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil, and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways. So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God.

For her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed. None who go to her

come back, nor do they regain the paths of life. So you will walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the righteous.

For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it. But the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it. In Proverbs chapter 2, the father takes up his address to his son again.

Bruce Waltke observes that this chapter could be regarded as an alphabetic poem. Many of the subjects introduced in this chapter will be unpacked in the chapters that follow, and in this chapter we have a condensed expression of many themes that we will see later on. Even though it is not an acrostic, it is a single sentence with 22 verses, corresponding in their number to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

It divides into two equal parts, the first half from verses 1 to 11, and the second from verses 12 to 22. The two halves can each be broken down further into two stanzas of four verses and one of three verses. The first half concerns the formative effect of wisdom upon the young man, and the second half the way that this formation will lead to the son's deliverance from a series of particular dangers, from wicked men and from the adulterous woman.

When reading scripture more generally, the structure is illuminating of the meaning, as when we do a jigsaw puzzle, it is far easier to assemble the puzzle when we are attending both to the shapes of the pieces and to the images upon them. The poetic forms of the book of Proverbs are means by which its wisdom is discovered, and we will see this quite clearly within this chapter. There is a movement here from the reception of the words from without to the treasuring of the words within, which we see in the first few verses.

Words must be memorised and meditated upon. The first couple of verses enjoin a mental posture of attentiveness to the sources of wisdom without us, and a disposition, a turning of the heart towards, understanding. Between verses 1 and 2 and verses 3 and 4, we have a movement from a receptive posture to a posture of pursuing wisdom in a far more active sense.

The son is supposed to take a posture similar to that by which Lady Wisdom was described in chapter 1 in his pursuit of insight. It is one thing to be receptive to wisdom when it comes across our path, another to be proactive and relentless in our pursuit of it. Far too many people receive wisdom somewhat reluctantly, rather than running after it.

There is an implicit comparison here to the young man pursuing a woman, and then to the quest for hidden treasure, an endeavour requiring great commitment and diligence, yet promising considerable rewards. The result of such a pursuit for the hidden treasure of wisdom is revealed in the second stanza, nothing less than the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God. The fear of the Lord has earlier been described as the beginning

of wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is both what sets people on the right course for the pursuit of wisdom, but also that which the quest deepens. The knowledge of God is personal and intimate acquaintance with one's creator. Wisdom is not primarily wrested from the world, but granted by God.

The gift of the Lord's wisdom principally comes from his mouth, from the words of wisdom given in the law, and from the words of the sages to whom he has granted insight, words that are delivered through the words of the father and the mother. The person who meditates upon the word of the Lord, and upon the words of those to whom the Lord has granted wisdom, will have a great advantage over any relying simply upon their own understanding. The Lord is the source of wisdom for the righteous.

As the righteous person constantly turns to the Lord for guidance, he experiences the Lord's protection in his way. This protection is, I believe, both the Lord's gracious, protective oversight of the path of his people, and the inherently safer nature of the path of righteousness. There are instructive parallels between verses 9 to 11, the third stanza, and the preceding stanza in verses 5 to 8, as Waltke recognises.

Verses 5 and 9 are paralleled, both summing up the result of a form of education in a statement beginning, then you will understand. Verses 6 and 10 are paralleled, both substantiating the summary statement that precedes them in a statement beginning with the word for. Finally, verses 8 and 11 are paralleled, both speaking of the way that the person who has been formed in such a manner will be watched over and guarded.

In the parallels we witness an important progression, from the wisdom of the external instruction of the Lord, to the wisdom of a person who is deeply internalised, and now delights in such instruction, they meditate and reflect upon it. This movement is a very important one if we are to understand the wisdom literature more generally. In wisdom there is an internalising of the word in delight, in memorisation, in meditation, in desire, and in understanding.

This is something seen in the Psalms, and also in places like the Book of Proverbs. The wise words of the Lord have become part of the righteous, just as the tablets of the covenant are treasured in the Ark of the Covenant at the heart of the Temple, so the word of the Lord is treasured in the heart of the wise. Many of us have great wisdom around us.

We have wise counsellors, we have access to the insights of gifted scholars and sages in our libraries, and most importantly we have the guidance of divine wisdom in scripture to which we devote ourselves. However, those who devote themselves to such external sources of wisdom will gradually find that those voices become part of their internal conversation, that their insight has taken up residence within, that wisdom has come

into their heart, as verse 10 suggests. As wisdom is internalised, knowledge will become increasingly desirable, pleasant to the wise son's soul.

The guarding that such a person experiences will increasingly be experienced from within. Such a person will have a discretion and understanding that protects him. Devotion to the instruction of the Lord and internalised wisdom, the formation described in the first half of the poem of this chapter, will deliver the son from the evil way, from the wickedness of men such as those described in the preceding chapter.

The men described in these verses are marked out by their rejection of the straight and clear paths of uprightness, for crooked paths in darkness, on which people will fall or be snared. Such men, in contrast to the wise son who finds knowledge pleasant, rejoice in doing evil and delight in its perverseness. They value evil for its evilness.

Such men are not to be trusted, their speech is twisted and their ways are devious. In addition to being delivered from wicked men, wisdom will also deliver from the forbidden woman and the adulterous. The young man is tempted not just by the gang and by the appeal of their vision of an evil brotherhood, but also by the allure of the promiscuous woman, the promise of whose sexual favours tempt him to devote his energies to her pursuit.

This promiscuous woman will be an important figure in the book of Proverbs more generally, especially in chapters 5-7. She is paradigmatic in many ways, she represents the appeal of folly herself. The men of the gang tempt with their perverted speech, the adulterous woman tempts with her smooth words.

Speech and the weighing of words is a recurring theme throughout the book of Proverbs. The wise person is a master of his own words and a prudent judge of those of others. The temptation of the adulterous woman is felt chiefly through the smoothness of her words, through their power to flatter those who have not established a firm grasp of the proper sources of a healthy self-regard.

Once again, as Waltke notes, there are parallels between two stanzas here, verses 12-15 and verses 16-19. Verses 12 and 16 are paralleled in their statements concerning deliverance from the dangerous speech of some threatening group or figure, the speech of perverse men and the words of the strange woman. Verses 13 and 17 both speak of forsaking something, the perverse men forsake the paths of uprightness and the forbidden woman forsakes the companion of her youth.

Verses 14-15 and verses 18-19 describe the respective paths of the perverse men and the forbidden woman, indicating the doom of those who follow them. The poem ends with a description of the ways and paths of the good and the righteous, in contrast to those offered by evil men and adulterous women. The theme of contrasting ways, a wise and righteous path leading to life and a foolish and wicked path leading to death, is one

that is encountered throughout the scriptures.

We ought to consider the way that the wisdom literature develops this theme of the contrasting paths. The path of righteousness and the path of wickedness, the path of obedience and the path of disobedience are now elaborated to include the juxtaposition of wisdom and folly, as the one following the path of righteousness begins to discern more fully its rationale, even beyond the duty of obedience. The final two verses declare the contrasting fates of the upright and the wicked, much as in places like Psalm 1. But perhaps the clearest comparison is between these verses and Psalm 37.

In verses 5-11 of that Psalm we read, Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.

Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Fret not yourself, it tends only to evil.

For the evil doer shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while the wicked will be no more. Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.

But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. A question to consider, where else in scripture do we see the choice between two paths placed before people? Romans chapter 15. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me. For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

As it is written, therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name. And again it is said, Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.

And again Isaiah says, The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles, in him will the Gentiles hope. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. I

myself am satisfied about you, brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the Gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, to bring the Gentiles to obedience, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the Gospel of Christ, and thus I make it my ambition to preach the Gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, those who never have been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints.

For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem, for they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy, and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all.

Amen. Romans chapter 15 is the conclusion of the body of the letter, when Paul's argument reaches its final climax. Here we find the larger themes of the letter connected with their very practical outworkings.

It picks up various of the themes that have been at play to this point, and ties them up. The most immediate theme of the relationship between the strong and the weak is taken up, alongside themes of the new worshipping community that arises out of God's great act of grace in Christ, which might remind us of chapter 12. Themes that take us back to the earlier parts of the letter are also present.

The union of Jews and Gentiles, the spread of the gospel throughout the world, the nations being brought to the obedience of faith, and the nature of Paul's apostolic mission take us back through to the very beginning of the letter, returning us to the point where we first started. Paul begins by charging those who are strong, among whom he seems to include himself, to bear the weaknesses of the weak. The task here is not merely one of patience with the weak, but the more positive duty of supporting and bearing them up.

The strength of the strong is best expressed not in judgment of the weak, but in gracious support of them. Indeed, as Christians, we are obliged to such support of our brothers and sisters. The point is not to pursue our own interests, or to please ourselves, but to build up others.

This principle is established by Christ himself, who we must imitate in this as in other matters, and Paul here alludes to Psalm 69 verse 9, Having quoted the scriptures, Paul makes a brief aside, explaining his understanding of the place of scripture in the life of the new covenant people of God. The scriptures are not just written for people in the past, but for us too. The word of God looks us directly in the eyes and speaks into our world.

We might recall here verses like 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verse 11. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Addressing the Roman Christians here, Paul wants to assure them that, as they patiently endure, and as they look to the words of the scriptures, they will find that their hope and their confidence grow.

The scripture is a source of encouragement. As we meditate upon its promises, heed its warnings, and are animated by its exhortations, and answer to its summons, we will be strengthened, encouraged, emboldened, and revived. Paul has just said that the scriptures were given so that, through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

Now he describes God as the God of endurance and encouragement, presumably the endurance and encouragement that he ministers to us through the scriptures. His prayer is that we would be granted harmony with each other, in accordance with Christ Jesus. The harmony and unity of the church, with one voice, is found in being accord with Christ Jesus, and in the act of glorifying God the Father.

As he did in chapter 14 verse 1, Paul charges the Roman Christians to welcome each other. The model for such welcome is Christ's welcome of us, and the outcome of such welcome is the glory of God. Christ's grace was seen in the way that he welcomed us, apart from any worth that rendered us worthy of welcome.

We glorify God as we participate in his welcome to others. Much of the book of And one

of the implications of this is the duty that we all have to live in terms of it. For instance, Jews need to welcome Gentiles, the strong need to welcome the weak, the rich need to welcome the poor.

The theme of God's glory is an important one here. Much as the unity of the church in its voice of worship glorifies God, so our welcoming of each other in Christ glorifies him. The welcoming of one another needs to be understood in terms of the great act of God in Christ that Paul summarizes in verses 8 and 9. This action in Christ achieves both the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to Israel, and as a result, allows for the Gentiles to enter into the enjoyment of the blessing and the mercy of God.

The promises that God made to Israel were promises through which the entire world would be blessed, both Jews and Gentiles having been welcomed by God through the act of his faithfulness and mercy in Christ should express welcome to each other in the one people of God that has been formed through this act. The act of God by which we are welcomed and the division between us and God removed is also an act of God by which people are reconciled and the divisions between them are removed. With three citations from scripture, Psalm 18 verse 49, Deuteronomy 32 verse 43 and Psalm 117 verse 1, all in the Septuagint, Paul brings forth testimony to the one voice with which a Jew and Gentile people should glorify God.

The underlying image evoked by these verses is that of Christ the sufferer who has triumphed and is now surrounded by Jews and Gentiles in a single rejoicing company of worshippers. This is the great outcome of it all. Capping off his argument, Paul quotes Isaiah chapter 11 verse 10.

The root of Jesse arises to rule the Gentiles. In Christ's resurrection he is the one who has risen as the root of Jesse. We might here wonder why Christ is the root of Jesse rather than the root of David.

In the Old Testament it is as if the tree of David has been completely uprooted and destroyed. When the Messiah finally arrives, he arises from the buried remnants of David's line as a root out of dry ground. The resurrection isn't just about Jesus as an individual or even Jesus as the Messiah.

It is also about the raising up of the dynasty of David which might have seemed lost and utterly destroyed. When Christ, the son of David and the root of Jesse arises, declared to be the son of God with power by the raising from the dead, he arises to rule the nations and the nations come to place their hope in him. Paul's prayer at this point is that God as the source of hope might give the Roman Christians joy and peace in their faith as the Holy Spirit's power at work among them causes their confidence in God's future to grow and to be strengthened.

Moving towards the end of the body of the letter, Paul begins his turn to some more

practical matters. However, as is invariably the case with Paul, even the most practical and concrete matters are shot through with theological concerns and considerations and insights. Paul doesn't seem to be writing to them to set them right on serious matters that they have gotten wrong but in order to minister to them as the apostle to the Gentiles and so that they will participate in and support his ministry in that regard, recognising the importance of his mission.

The main teaching he offers serves more as a reminder than as a correction or a novel instruction. Paul has however been given a very particular and special calling by God as a minister of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles. Paul has been entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised as we see in Galatians 2, verse 8, paralleling him with Peter who has the Gospel to the circumcised.

He has a special calling and as such he has an appropriate interest in the Romans and gift to minister to them. He describes what he is performing as a priestly service. He is preparing an offering to be presented in the Holy Spirit who will set the Gentiles apart as acceptable to God.

As in the beginning of chapter 12, Paul here presents the service of God in terms and concepts borrowed from temple worship. Such patterns of worship are fulfilled in the humaniform worship of the church. Paul expresses a boast in what Christ is accomplishing through him.

He is well aware of the fact that this all comes from the gracious act of God and his Son, not in some peculiar skill of Paul's own. It is being achieved by the Spirit of God. The extent of Paul's ministry has stretched from Jerusalem in the south to Illyricum in the north-west, the present day region of the Balkans.

The movement of the Gospel described in Acts begins in Jerusalem, includes all Judea, extends to Samaria and from there to the end of the earth. Paul also describes his ministry in a way that goes out from Jerusalem and moves to the wider parts of the world. Paul's mission is to break new ground, rather than merely to develop work that has been started by others.

He sees himself as one introducing the message of the Gospel to those who had not formally heard. While there is nothing wrong with building on another person's foundation, Paul speaks of such building in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, that is not the mission that Paul himself is undertaking. This ambition that drives Paul's mission is now directing his work towards the land of Spain.

He has hitherto been occupied in the eastern Mediterranean region, but now claims that he no longer has room for work there as a pioneer and church planter. Clearly the message of the Gospel has spread widely in those areas, and there are now communities of Christians in all of the major regions. This might give us a sense of how rapidly the

Gospel was taking root during this early period.

At this juncture the logical next move for Paul is toward the western Mediterranean by way of Rome. The mission to Spain is one that he hopes that the Christians will help to support, and as he makes his way there he hopes to spend some time with them. Before he makes his way towards Spain however, Paul has to bring aid from Macedonia and Achaia to the poor saints in Jerusalem.

This, as we see in so many of Paul's letters, is a task that Paul regards as an integral dimension of his mission. In letter after letter he speaks of, or encourages the Christians to whom he is writing to participate in, this gift. For Paul this gift is a lot more than just a needed financial boost to some needy Christians.

It is an expression of the unity between Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ, and the coming in of the riches of the Gentiles to Zion is prophesied in the Old Testament. Paul sees himself as fulfilling this. Paul's mission is not merely to the Gentiles, but also to encourage the mutual welcome in the Gospel between Jews and Gentiles.

In this gift, a reciprocity of grace between Jews and Gentiles is not merely expressed, but realised, strengthening the Church as a single undivided body of Jews and Gentiles. Paul's ministry then, is not merely about forming individual churches in particular cities and regions, but about forging an international church across regions with strong bonds of fellowship, mutual service and reciprocal recognition. This task of remembering the poor saints in Jerusalem was a task that the pillars of the Church in Jerusalem especially charged Paul with in Galatians chapter 2. Paul's concern to accompany this gift may be motivated by his desire to ensure and to demonstrate that he has faithfully discharged that commission.

After that has been done, he can move to Spain by way of Rome. Travel within the ancient world was often dangerous, as we see from Paul's own hardship lists in books such as 2 Corinthians. Although travel was safer on account of the Roman Empire, many unknown dangers still threatened those engaged in long journeys such as Paul's.

In addition to the typical dangers of travel, Paul also has the concern of Judeans who are, as he once did, seeking to destroy the Church. Paul is a marked man, and they would be eager to do away with him. He calls the Roman Christians to wrestle in prayer that he will be preserved in his mission, and that it will serve the purpose of bringing joy and stronger unity to the Church, as the gift of the Gentiles is pleasing to the Judean Christians.

His desire is that, by their prayers, he would finally safely be brought to them in Rome, having the joy of his completed commission and of fellowship with them. A question to consider, much of Paul's ministry described in this chapter and elsewhere is not at the level of the local Church, but in forging a stronger, more united, more harmonious, and

more mutually welcoming international Church, a Church that spreads across many regions and cities. What are some of the ways in which Paul pursues this mission? How might we serve the same sort of mission in our own day?