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March 5th: Proverbs 4 & Philippians 1:1-11

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Get wisdom! Pursuing Paul's greetings to the Philippians.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 4. When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble. Keep hold of instruction. Do not let go.

Guard her, for she is your life. Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it.

Do not go on it. Turn away from it and pass on, for they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong. They are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble, for they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

But the path of the righteous is like the light of the dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness. They do not know over what they stumble.

My son, be attentive to my words. Incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight.

Keep them within your heart, for they are life to those who find them and healing to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you.

Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Ponder the path of your feet, then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left.

Turn your foot away from evil. Honoring father and mother, a principle that is integral to the practice and communication of wisdom, makes it possible for the lessons learned by previous generations to be passed on to later ones, without these lessons always having to be relearned from scratch the hard way. In Proverbs chapter 4 the father shares the teaching that he himself received from his son's grandfather, which he passes on to them in turn.

The father gives his sons not merely his teaching, and here the teaching being given is largely the grandfather's teaching that he is reporting, but his own example as a learner. The father's example as a faithful learner and the confirming witness of the grandfather strengthens his teaching. He was once in his son's shoes, and the lessons that he received from his father stood him in good stead.

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

The father-son relationship is such that the father is raising another to fill his position in the chain of the generations. A son is a potential father, and a good father is a son who has attained to an appropriate maturity. The sons here may be not a group of brothers, but a group of students, a possibility Michael Fox mentions.

Bruce Waltke suggests the possibility that the father might be speaking not to a group of his immediate children, but to the multi-generational lineage arising from him. The grandfather's training of the father began when he was still very young and impressionable, still very much within the orbit of his mother and dependent on her tenderness. The image here is of a loving household, with two parents actively committed to their child's care and instruction.

The importance of the involvement of fathers and mothers in the raising of the son is seen at many points in the Book of Proverbs. Father and mother both bring something

distinct to the task of child-rearing, and there are different areas where the teaching of one or the other becomes more important. Gender dynamics pervade the Book of Proverbs in ways to which we ought to be attentive.

The father-son relationship is treated as paradigmatic for the passing on of wisdom, but the quest for the right woman is seen as paradigmatic for attaining it. Wisdom is personified as a woman, and the book ends with a great poem concerning the wise wife. The most important thing in the instruction of the grandfather reported by the father was that the son must get wisdom, here implicitly personified as the woman he should want as his bride.

As Genesis chapter 2 verse 24 teaches, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife in marriage. In many respects, the paradigmatic process of a son's development is from the tender care of his mother, to the instruction in the law of his father, to the arms of his bride. Both the mother and the father have to propel their son towards another.

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

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

One possesses wisdom not as knowledge in one's brain, so much as in a manner akin to the way that one might have a wife. A husband has a wife as he commits himself to her, doesn't forsake her, as he loves her, prizes her and honours her. The same is true of wisdom.

The son is exhorted to devote himself to wisdom, as he might devote himself to his wife. To possess wisdom as his own requires an enduring and deepening commitment and relationship with her, a posture of heart towards something distinct from himself to which he must always be rightly comported. As he commits himself to wisdom as his bride, wisdom will keep him, guard him, exalt him, honour him, adorn him, and crown him with the beautiful crown that a bridegroom might wear.

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

heed his father's words is once again attended with the familiar promise of the fifth commandment.

The days of those who heed the words of their parents will be long in the land. The palette of the metaphor of the paths of wisdom includes terms such as way, paths, walk, step, run, stumble, turning away, going on it, passing on, all terms or expressions that appear at several points in verses 10-19. The juxtaposition of the way of righteousness and the way of wickedness here is familiar to us from other parts of scripture, reminding us of places such as Psalm 1 and its warning against walking in the way of the wicked.

The metaphor of walking highlights the way that wisdom is, for Proverbs, primarily about the art of living well, rather than about mere head knowledge. Wisdom is displayed in the realm of behaviour and the teaching of wisdom is mentoring and discipleship in the skills of life. The language of verse 13 makes clear that wisdom is something that must be diligently persisted in, never abandoned and vigilantly guarded.

Wisdom is nothing less than the son's life. If he loses wisdom, he loses everything. The path of the wicked, in contrast to the way of wisdom, is treacherous and must be avoided at all costs.

In verses 14 and 15, the father adds warning to warning, lest the son fail to recognise just how imperative it is that he resist the law of the way of the wicked. The verses that follow describe the wicked as those whose regular bodily rest is hampered by their commitment to evil. Wickedness consumes them.

They are obsessed with it. It becomes more essential to them than sleep and their very food and drink. There couldn't be a starker contrast than there is between the path of such evil men and the path of the righteous.

The father adopts the very strongest of oppositions to describe the difference. The difference between light and darkness. The path of the righteous isn't merely like light, but it is like the rising light of the dawn.

It becomes clearer and more glorious as it ascends. Righteousness matures over time. The wisdom of those who have persisted in the way of wisdom for many years greatly exceeds those who are just setting out on it.

By contrast, the wicked walk a crooked way, shrouded in a stygian pitch, unable to see where they tread and ultimately doomed to stumbling. The concluding speech of the chapter, its third, once again exhorts the son to vigilance. He must be attentive and incline his ear to the sayings of his father, not letting them out of his sight and carefully keeping them in his heart.

The word jealously guarded in the heart is like the tablets of the law in the Ark of the Covenant. This is, the father assures him, nothing short of life and healing, like the tree

of life to which wisdom was likened in the preceding chapter. The wise words of the father must be found.

They require the son to search them out, to pursue them and to devote himself to them. Merely hearing them is not enough. They cannot be carelessly possessed.

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

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

The heart is the secret spring from which everything arises, and mastering it is our first, our greatest and our most enduring task. The heart is exposed to the sight of God, but generally veiled to others. We are often most concerned with how we appear in the sight of others, and will go to much effort to make ourselves appear righteous to our neighbour, little mindful of how we appear to the God who sees the hearts of men.

However, the scripture charges us to be most vigilant and concerned with our hearts in the sight of God. As Robert Murray MacShane purportedly, but perhaps apocryphally said, What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more. The state of our heart is upstream from everything else.

The pollution of our hearts will defile every one of our actions, or alternatively, its godliness can be a source of life to all who come into contact with us. From the heart upstream, the Father concludes by looking downstream to the mouth, the eyes and the feet. Evil speech is described using similar language to that of the evil way.

It is crooked, it is devious. It is not straightforward. In Proverbs, it is the mouth that first reveals the state of the heart.

Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks, as our Lord says. In addition to the mouth, the eyes must be fixed on what is most important. If your eyes are not fixed, you will not be walking in a straight way.

The person whose attention is distracted, whose eyes are constantly diverted from the things that they ought to be focused upon, will always be in danger of stumbling. The movement from the well-guarded heart to the well-ordered eyes that are fixed on the things that really matter, to the foot that walks in the path of righteousness, is one that is very much in line with the message of Proverbs more generally. One of the things being expressed in these verses is that the whole of the body must be coordinated in the task of righteousness, in the way of wisdom.

A question to consider. How does this chapter's portrayal of wisdom differ from common portrayals within our current day? What might we learn from the contrast? Philippians chapter 1, verses 1 to 11. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always, in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. The epistle to the Philippians was written to Christians in the small city of Philippi, a Roman colony in the region of Macedonia.

His inhabitants, on account of its being a Roman colony, enjoyed certain privileges. Paul first visited the city in Acts chapter 16, where he and Silas encountered Lydia, a Gentile God-fearer, and some other praying women. Lydia and her household were baptised, and a small church seems to have been formed, seemingly with Lydia and her household at its heart.

After Paul delivered a slave girl from a spirit of divination, they had been thrown in prison, where the Philippian jailer and his family were converted. Paul writes this letter from prison. Where exactly Paul was in prison is a matter of debate.

Arguments have been advanced for Ephesus or Caesarea, but I think the strongest case is still that for Rome. Paul was likely writing in the early 60s. By this time it would have been about a dozen years or more since he first visited the city of Philippi.

Within the letter he gives the Philippians news of his situation, commends Epaphroditus to them, and expresses his appreciation for their generous support. The epistle is addressed from both Paul and Timothy, their two names are alongside each other. Paul is the author, however.

It differs from most other Pauline greetings by not referring to Paul as an apostle. The letter is addressed to the saints at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. This suggests that by this point Philippi has a rather more developed church structure.

However, we should beware of assuming too formalised an order, or too technical a

meaning to such terms at this point. The overseers were likely men especially responsible as guardians of the congregation, while the deacons were likely persons especially charged with service in practical matters on behalf of the church. As usual, Paul wishes the recipients of his letter grace and peace.

These terms should not be read as mere general pleasantries, as they come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The grace is the grace that God shows in the gospel of his Son, and the peace is the peace that arises from that. The epistle is addressed from Paul and Timothy, but immediately Paul lapses into the first person singular, making apparent that he is the sole author.

As Paul typically does in his letters, he gives detailed thanks for the people to whom he is writing, and for what God is accomplishing in and through them. As Mourner Hooker observes, his thanksgiving expresses joy, gratitude, confidence, affection, and longing for them in succession. The memory of them is a source of joy to him and a spur to thankful prayer.

For Paul, one of the great benefits of seeing God at work in other people and their situations is the way in which it encourages many to express thanksgiving. He speaks of their partnership in the gospel. While this might refer to the way that the Philippians supported him in their prayers and some of them served alongside him, it is likely that Paul has in mind chiefly the particular financial support that the Philippian church had given him in his labours.

Paul writes of this more directly in chapter 4 verses 15-19. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again, not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

I have received full payment and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

In chapter 4, as here in chapter 1, Paul makes clear that he regards such giving less as something given to him personally than as a partnership in his mission, as a herald of the gospel message. They will receive their reward, not in thanks and indebtedness from Paul himself, but from the hand of God. He expresses his confidence in the fact that what God first began in that small prayer group by the river Amphilipi with Lydia would be brought to a glorious completion on the last day, when Christ will be revealed.

Paul's joy, gratitude and confidence in the Philippians are appropriate as he shares with them in grace and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. It isn't just a sharing in

the experiences of struggle and persecution, but a sharing in the reception of the gift of God in Christ through and in those things and sharing in the mission of Christ that they are all labouring in together. Ultimately, the suffering we experience in our Christian calling is sharing in God's grace and in the fate of the gospel itself, which prospers in and through us as God has granted us to be partakers in its mission.

Paul's feelings for the Philippians are intense and he longs for them all with an affection that comes from Christ himself, not just an affection of human friendship, but an affection that we feel towards those to whom we are joyfully united in the Messiah. He concludes this introductory section of his letter by expressing his prayer for the Philippians. His prayer is for their growth, a growth that flows from the abounding of their love, both for God and for others.

This love should develop into a greater maturity as they grow in knowledge and insight, so that they are able to perceive and approve those things that are good. As a result of such abounding love and deepening moral discernment, they will be prepared for the day of Christ's revelation and judgment, pure and blameless before him, bearing a rich harvest of God's work within them in a way that brings glory and praise to God. A question to consider, how is Paul's understanding of his and the Philippians' participation in the gospel and its fate a source of encouragement, joy and confidence?