

Proverbs 4:1-27

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning.

I only have one letter from my grandfather. He sent it to me in October 1986, when some of you undergrads were just born.

I was, I'm sorry, 1987, let me clarify that. I was a freshman in college when I received this letter, the only letter that I can recall actually getting from my grandfather.

And the occasion of it was Black Monday. For those of you who are old enough, you will remember the Dow Jones Industrial Average on one day dropped 22%. It was the greatest percentage drop ever in the history of the stock market.

And if it were, what happened today, it would calculate to about a 4,664 point drop in the Dow Jones Industrial.

[1 : 13] That would make some waves. My grandfather was a banker and an investor, and he wrote a letter to all of his grandchildren telling them to be patient and to be wise and to respond well to this crisis.

He said, think long-term, not short-term. He said, invest in tested, proven stocks. Don't fall into this innovation that's going on around us.

He said, don't think that you are going to be independently better than the stock market, but follow a good consensus lead, and you will do well. I do not say this to give you financial advice.

The stock market is much more complicated today. Investing is much more complicated today. And the financial world has never been as clear as we might hope it would be. But what my grandfather did encourage his grandchildren to do that day is to think about investing well.

What are you going to invest your life in? What are you going to invest, and how are you going to think about what it is? This morning, as we continue in our series in Proverbs, the message that I have for you is fairly simple.

[2 : 33] Because the whole book of Proverbs is basically telling us to invest in wisdom from God. What does that mean?

Well, if you remember back in chapter 1, verse 7, it says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Sometimes we think of wisdom as a collection of information that if we master and apply appropriately, we can be successful in life, it becomes a tool in our hand to try to achieve greatness. But that, in fact, is not biblical wisdom. Biblical wisdom is being rightly related to our Creator. It is recognizing it is He who has made the world and made us.

And that He has given us, in His Word, much information about how and why He created it. And as we live under the wisdom that He reveals to us in it, we find that we live more in harmony with creation.

We find that we live in the redemptive patterns of the God that we serve. And perhaps, perhaps, it will lead to an easier life or avoid some difficulties.

[3 : 54] But more so, it will lead us to a life with God that will begin here and go for eternity. And that's what wisdom in the book of Proverbs seems to be about.

Not promises, do this and you'll get this. But this is the way God has created the world. Live in these patterns. And you will relate rightly to your God. Now, many of you are graduating today.

And I want to say this kindly and gently. Youth doesn't always treat wisdom very well. We don't always want wisdom. We can fall into all sorts of patterns that reflect our culture, that reflect our society, that reflect our fallen hearts, that where we don't treasure wisdom.

Theologian and author J.I. Packer says that our hearts love this kind of thing. The newer is the truer. Only what is recent is decent. Every shift of ground is a shift forward.

And every latest word must be hailed as the last word on a subject. It's what C.S. Lewis and Owen Barfield called chronological snobbery. That is, whatever is presently held to be true must be true. [5 : 15] Whatever was held in the past must be deficient because we have progressed beyond it. Now, Lewis goes on to say, not everything in the past was good either.

Don't think that just because it's in the past it's better. But recognize that things that are in the past have been tested and evaluated over time. And we can continue to look at them and think about them from a different standpoint.

Whereas the things that we believe and hold to today are shaped so much by our present context and culture that we struggle to see it for what it truly is because we're so enmeshed in it. Even when that's not true, that chronological snobbery is one of the reasons why we resist wisdom. We often can also fall into a more mechanical view, as I mentioned earlier.

We love in our culture today how-tos, 10 steps to, and the keys to success in. Think about if you went to Barnes & Noble or went to go on Amazon and search for those kinds of titles, how many titles you would see.

[6 : 33] We love that kind of information because we think that it can put us in control to get ahead and to find success in life.

The book of Proverbs speaks to us and tells us that there is a wisdom for us that is worth pursuing. And our chapter this morning, chapter 4, if you want to turn there, it's page 529 in your pew Bibles, is mostly an encouragement.

It is an encouragement to value, to cherish, to esteem highly, and to go after the wisdom from God. The wisdom from God that is timeless.

The wisdom from God that is deeper than a how-to or a keys to success, but a wisdom from God that helps us relate rightly to Him.

As we look at it, we will see this exhortation coming from His description, His portrayal of what wisdom is. So that's what we're going to look at this morning.

[7 : 45] Let's go ahead and read, if you'll read along with me. Proverbs, chapter 4. We're going to read the whole chapter, and then I'll pray, and then we will continue. Hear, O sons, a father's instruction.

Be attentive that you may gain insight, for I give you good precepts. Do not forsake my teaching. When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one, in the sight of my mother, he taught me and said to me, let your heart hold fast my words, keep my commandments, and live.

Get wisdom, get insight. Do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you. Love her, and she will guard you.

The beginning of wisdom is this. Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you.

She will honor you, if you embrace her. She will place on your head a graceful garland. She will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

[8 : 57] Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. I have taught you the way of wisdom. I have led you in the paths of uprightness. When you walk, your steps 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. 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 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 and incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight.

[10 : 05] 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 and all your ways will be sure.

Do not swerve to the right or to the left. Turn your foot away from evil. Will you pray with me? Lord, we are thankful for your word.

We are thankful that in it you have revealed yourself to us. You have spoken to us, Lord, through this word. Lord, and Lord, we pray this morning that by your spirit you would make our minds alert, our bodies awake, our hearts soft, ready to receive from you and to learn from you.

Lord, will you teach us this morning and stir our hearts, Lord, to love you and to love your wisdom. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[11:28] Amen. The beginning of wisdom is this. Get wisdom. There it is. That's all I have to say. Thanks for coming. No. All I'm going to be doing is explaining that really for the rest of our time together.

The structure of this passage, if you look through it, it's very clear. In verses 1, in verse 10, and then in verse 20, the father interjects again with an exhortation, Hear, O son. Hear, my son.

My son, be attentive to my teachings. And so, that breaks us up into three sections where he's encouraging us to go for wisdom. He says, go for wisdom in verses 1 through 9 because she is a tradition worth treasuring.

He says, in verses 10 through 19, go after wisdom because she is a path of light and life. And finally, verses 20 through 27, go after wisdom for she is a worthy obsession.

So, let's look at those together in turn. Firstly, verses 1 through 10, she is a tradition worth treasuring. It's fascinating to me as the father, we've seen this form right?

[12:37] The book of Proverbs is written in this form where a father is advising his son. And we ought not to genderize that too much. This is simply the passing on of wisdom from one generation to the next and to say, and to recognize that there is.

And yet, what he says there, interestingly, right, is in verses 3 and 4. He says, my son, listen to what I'm saying.

Oh, and by the way, I want you to know it's not coming from me. This is a part of a tradition that's been passed down from generation to generation. Go get wisdom.

This is what my father taught me and it's what I want to teach you. And it's not just go get it, but go get it in a particular manner. Do you see the heart orientation of it? Look with me in verse 4.

Let your heart hold fast my words. Verse 6. It's not just know wisdom, but it's love her. Verse 8.

Prize her and embrace her.

[13:42] As the father is holding up wisdom before his son saying, pursue this. There's almost a romantic imagery going on here. Like a young man pursuing the object of his desire.

The woman who he has set his affection on. If you've ever fallen in love, you know what it's like. It fills your mind.

It moves your actions. It drains your bank account. The pursuit of a romantic relationship is the image that the writer here pulls on to say, like that, with all of your being and particularly, this is not just a pursuit of knowledge and a head thing, but this is a heart thing that you would prize and cherish.

Be captivated by wisdom. Spend your energy wooing her so that she may be yours. And he says, and there's good reason for this because she will do you good.

Verse 4 says, do this and you will live. Verse 6, you will be kept and guarded by her. Verse 8, you will be exalted and honored by her.

[14:59] And verse 9, you will be adorned with beauty. You will be given this garland and a crown which perhaps, again, may be a marriage imagery, but whatever it is, there is this sense of royalty and a sense of great honor and glory that is being bestowed on one.

And so it is not just something worth going after altruistically, but in fact, what we find when we pursue wisdom is that it is good for us.

The very thing that we want most, we find in it. Wisdom, contrary perhaps to our youthful evaluation, is not crusty, it is not dull, it is not stale, but it is glorious and beautiful and exhilarating to learn about and to walk in the paths of wisdom.

So go get her. Now, we need to recognize this is not the pattern of our human heart. From the very beginning in the Garden of Eden, God gave simple commands.

Here's how this world works. Do this and you will live. Eve, and Adam and Eve chose not to follow that. We have an independent streak in our sinfulness that is strong.

[16:28] I remember when I was a young believer, I had been a Christian for one year when I went off to college, and I came across this ministry, and they were crusty, and they were stale, and they were kind of boring, and I thought, goodness gracious, Jesus is so wonderful.

How can you be so dull? And I spent my first year criticizing, challenging, pushing, seeking for change.

I wish I hadn't. There was a good heart somewhere in the middle of it, but in the midst of it, in my impatience, in my judgmental spirit, in my arrogance, believing that I knew better than they, I destroyed relationships and damaged hearts along the way.

Thankfully, they were gracious and patient with me. But I wished I had listened more and thought less of my own ideas.

I wished I had been less headstrong and been more willing to follow for a while, to learn. I wished I had a better awareness of how little I actually knew and how much I had to learn.

[17:51] I thought I was wise, because in my own eyes, I was. But the beginning of wisdom is this. You don't have wisdom yet.

Go get it. You need it. So how do we apply this? How do we think about this? Well, it's very simple. God has given you a church full of people and there are wise people among you. They have walked with the Lord through many things. And you may look at them and wonder, do they have, do they really love Jesus?

They seem pretty quiet. Do they really love Jesus? Because they're not as active as I am. Do they really love Jesus? Whether you stay here or whether you move on as you graduate and go find a church that has intergenerational worship, go find older people and sit with them and learn from them.

Don't assume what they have to teach you and bracket what they have to say to you. But ask them about their lives. Ask them what they have learned from God.

[19:10] Ask them how God has worked in them and through them. Ask them the lessons that they have learned. Now look, I wanted to say this. Not every old person is wise.

You can choose foolishness for your whole life. So be a little discerning. But be gracious in your discerning. And look for God to teach you to find wisdom, the tradition that is worth treasuring in those among us who have walked with the Lord longer than us.

Trust that you will find good things. Wisdom then is not only a tradition to be treasured but then as we move on to the second section starting in verse 10. Wisdom is a path of light and life.

The Father brings up a contrast that we've already seen. There are two paths to go. There is a path of wisdom and a path of foolishness. One of them is light and one of them is darkness.

He says don't take the path of foolishness and the path of darkness. Interestingly this path is not simply a framework of thought or a particular direction but it's also people.

[20:29] Look with me again in verse 14. Do not enter the path of the wicked. Those are people not a pattern of activity or behavior. Don't follow people who are foolish and who reject God and have no fear of Him.

And then the second half do not walk in the way of evil. This then is the patterns. Look for the patterns of thought and of behavior in our culture and in our society that have no regard for God and have no fear of Him.

Look for those patterns. Recognize that these patterns are, verse 12, a pattern of stumbling. Verse 16 and 17, a path that obsesses and consumes your heart with being destructive in other people's lives.

It is, in verse 19, a path of darkness in which you stumble because you can't even see clearly to know the things that you are stumbling over. recognize, this Father says, recognize that the way of foolishness is a way of darkness and you will stumble and you will fall in the midst of it.

We resist this. We think, how could we ever do this? Why would we ever want to do that? And yet, we do. Think of 3,000 years of human civilization in history.

[22:04] And yes, there have been great lights and wonderful progress and there are certain evils that exist less today than they have in the past.

And yet, when we look at the overall picture of humanity, are we actually better off in our pursuit of life apart from God?

Is our world a better place? Because of that. Has it actually progressed that much? Nick's sermon last week, if you weren't here, reminded us that the greatest problem we have is that we think that

wisdom can be found in us.

Where in fact, wisdom needs to be found in God who is outside of us and outside of our creation, who has created it and who therefore is able to instruct us in it.

But how little we follow in those patterns and therefore how much we walk in darkness. Father says there is another way. The path of uprightness in verse 12, she says, she is your life.

[23 : 17] The path of wisdom is the path of life. You may have seen it. This is a theme over and over and over again in this passage that wisdom actually leads us to life because it is in accordance with, it is in harmony with the God who created the world and created life.

And he says, pursue this path. And the language he uses in saying pursue this path means it's not a once for all decision. You don't say, okay, I'm going to choose wisdom.

Now that's done. Now I can move on. But in fact, this is a decision that you make over and over and over and over again because in every situation there are new opportunities for us to choose foolishness instead of wisdom.

Think of David who for year after year after year chose faithfully to trust the Lord and walk in wisdom as he was persecuted, as he faced great enemies, as he lived as an exile, as he was brought into the kingdom and the palace.

And when it seemed like wisdom had finally given him everything that he ever wanted, he stumbled. Instead of going out to war and fighting with his men, he set his eyes on his own pleasure and he walked in foolishness.

[24 : 47] It didn't destroy him. God was merciful to him which is a good word for us that we may stumble in foolishness at times and yet God's grace can continue to sustain us through it.

And yet, his stumbling still had grave consequences. And so the father says, pursue wisdom. There is a path to go on.

Stay on it. And it is a path of life for you. It is a path of light. There is this beautiful image at the end of the chapter, or at the end of this section, verse 18.

The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn which grows brighter and brighter and brighter. Part of what he is saying is as we continue in the path of wisdom more and more, it makes more sense to us.

It makes, it brings life to our souls. And we find it to be more and more good. And like the light of the dawn which breaks on the horizon and then as the sun continues to rise, envelops us in the warmth and the clarity and the beauty of its light.

[26 : 00] It says, this is what wisdom is for us. Sometimes I think we fear that wisdom will be like walking into a dark tunnel.

I don't know why this is going to be good for me. It doesn't seem right. I don't see the end of the tunnel. It just seems like darkness. I feel like if I go back out, I have more freedom.

I have more opportunities. I'm not limiting myself. But in fact, the way of wisdom leads us to life.

And as we go down that tunnel which maybe at the beginning looks constricting and small and uncertain as to why it would be good, the more we live in it, the more we see that it's good.

Here's a silly example. My kids don't know that they need to go to bed. I have to have wisdom for them to say, you need to go to bed. And you need to turn off your light and you need to stop playing with your toys and put your head on your pillow and go to sleep.

[27 : 08] They don't know that if they followed their own foolishness in bedtimes over a period of days, they will end up being a wreck and they won't enjoy anything.

Their souls will be a mess and their relationships will be a mess and I will be a mess because I have to clean it up or at least I have to deal with it.

But if I show them the way of wisdom, getting a good night's sleep is good for you, they will find, yes, that is good and I'm glad to wake up every morning not tired and I'm glad to have energy to live the day and to do things and to not feel like all I want to do is go sleep and I enjoy my days when I'm not cranky and crabby because I'm tired.

Proverbs will take that pattern and it will apply it to things like your marital relationships, your sex life, how you spend your money, how you use your words, what your friendships are like.

There are ways that may be initially unfamiliar or feeling constricting to us but they are in fact a path of light and life for us and if we trust God and follow them we will find the goodness in it.

[28 : 34] So wisdom is not only a tradition worth treasuring, not only a path of light and life but finally in those last verses in 20 through 27 she is a worthy obsession.

It strikes me when you look at this again, look at verses 20 through 23. Be attentive, incline your ear, be active in listening. Don't let them escape from your sight, keep them within your heart, grasp onto them and hold onto them.

Verse 23 again, keep your heart with all vigilance. There is a grasping for a picture of jealously guarding something that we have taken hold of.

Father says, if you would have wisdom you must keep her. Wisdom is what your hearts need. It is the thing that will allow your heart to work the way it is meant to work.

And then he goes on in verses 24 through 27 he says, and it's going to take everything you have. One of the most striking things in these verses is the various parts of the body that he uses to say, this is what it's like.

[29 : 55] Keep your mouth away from foolishness. Keep your eyes fixed on the right thing, your attention, your focus. Verse 26, 27, all the way down to your feet.

What is the direction of your life? Where are your feet headed? The writer of Proverbs is saying, there is wisdom out there and you ought to engage every faculty you have to treasure it, to value it, and to go after it.

With the focus of an Olympic athlete training for the gold, with the earnestness of a lover pursuing his beloved, with the eagerness of a treasure hunter, taking all of his resources towards this one thing that is worth gaining above all.

The beginning of wisdom is this, get wisdom. Understand how to relate rightly to your God. We don't always do this.

It's easy to become careless in our life. To pursue whatever our whims of the day, whatever seems to be before us, whatever others lead us to or push us into.

[31 : 17] There are times when we choose poorly. We don't engage all of our energy in one direction. Sometimes we hedge our bets. I want wisdom with God, but I don't know if that doesn't work out, I want to have a plan B.

Sometimes we avoid the responsibility and let other people make decisions for us. As you head out into your next stage of life, for those of you who are graduates, you will always have a boss.

You will always have an advisor. You will always have someone else in your life who is willing to make these decisions for you and to tell you what you should value and what you should pursue and what you should set your heart on and what you should live for.

But here, in this passage, the writer of the Proverbs says, pursue wisdom, pursue being rightly related to God. And of course, friends, this is exactly what Minois read for us earlier from Philippians chapter 3.

This wholehearted pursuit of wisdom finds its ultimate fulfillment, again, not in a body of knowledge that helps us navigate life a little better, but in a person.

[32 : 41] Because what we see in the New Testament is that when Christ has come, He is now the wisdom of God for us. He is now the way through which we find life and light.

He is the one who, through His life and death and resurrection, allows us to be rightly related to God. And so, Paul says, I count all things as loss for the sake of knowing Christ and being found in Him.

Because what I find in Christ, a righteousness that allows me to stand before a holy God, even in my own sinfulness and foolishness, what I find in Christ and that righteousness is so precious and so unique and so wonderful and so essential for me to relate to God rightly that everything else doesn't matter in light of it.

He says, Christ Jesus has made me His own, therefore I pursue Him with all that I have. He is the tradition that's worth treasuring.

He is the path to life. He is the one who commands our obsession because He is worthy of all of our lives.

[34 : 05] That we would count all things as loss for the sake of knowing Him and having fellowship with Him in His sufferings and in His death and in His resurrection. Because He is the one who has rescued us from our foolishness.

He is the one who has rescued us from our rebellion against God by taking on the cross the penalty and the death that we deserve and by reconciling God to us so that all who put their faith in Christ, all who, like Paul, have seen the beauty and the treasure and the wonder of what God has done for us, take hold of it.

and as we take hold of Christ, then, what happens? All of our life is relativized. It is not that we put off all these other things.

It is not that we stop being students, parents, teachers, friends, workers, but all of those things take their place under this one single passion.

My life is to be lived pursuing a knowledge of Christ. Whatever successes I have, whatever fame I achieve, whatever honors or praise I get from others, those things are only worth anything when they are under and out of this single-minded pursuit of Christ, our wisdom, and our life.

[35 : 38] And we find that when we say Christ is our wisdom and our life, all of our lives are energized. Again, like the lover. When we wake up in the morning, we think, today I get to serve Christ.

When I fall asleep at night, I get to think, Christ, help me. I'm so weak. When we find ourselves in times of crisis, we run and find Christ to be our refuge and our strength.

We find in Christ the thing that we want to live for and die for. We find in Christ the things that we want to pass on to our children. Not just wisdom about how to live, but wisdom about how to know God.

And from that, everything else comes. So for you, particularly graduates today, but for all of us, this is always a good question for us to be asking.

What will your life be about? Where will you invest? My grandfather was great at investing his money. I wish his life was characterized by investing spiritually in Christ.

[36 : 51] What about you? As you enter your career, as you take the next step in your life, will you again determine that Christ is the one that you want to pursue?

As you develop friendships, relationships, will God's wisdom shape you and guide you? As you set your life goals, will you let Christ be the one who leads you?

Let's pray. Father, Father, we thank you this morning for this word. Lord, we pray, Lord, especially for those today who are moving on, that as they go, Lord, they would heed this call.

The beginning of wisdom is to get wisdom and to find it in Christ. Lord, may this be true for all of us, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.