



Proverbs - Chapter Four

II Proverbs 1:8-9:18 - A Father's Invitation to Wisdom (continues)

Summary of Chapter Four

To an earnest call for attention to his teachings, the writer adds a commendation of wisdom, preceded and enforced by the counsels of his father and teacher. To this he adds a caution against the devices of the wicked, and a series of exhortations to docility, integrity, and uprightness.

II.g Proverbs 4:1-9 - Parental Advice

In this appeal the father cites the appeal that his own father made to him. The effect is threefold. Firstly, the father shows he can identify with his children. He, too, was once young and under the tutelage of a father. Secondly, the father implies that wisdom did not begin with him but goes back through many generations. It is not a novelty, but is enduring. Thirdly, he suggests that godliness and prudence are part of their family heritage, and he wants his sons to maintain the legacy. The text is structured in two parts: the opening encouragement (vv.1-2) and the citation of the boy's grandfather (vv.3-9).

- ¹ Listen, children, to a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight;
- ² for I give you good precepts:
do not forsake my teaching.

Proverbs 4:1-2

Listen, children. Usually Proverbs addresses the reader as ‘my child’ or ‘my son,’ but the plural is used here and in Proverbs 5:7 and 7:24. This is the instruction of a father for the benefit of all the children.

Be attentive, that you may gain insight. This appeal and the appeal to hear in the first line means there may be hesitancy or resistance on part of the children that must be overcome by the appeal. Parents are often discouraged by a child’s resistance to their wisdom and instruction, but it still must be spoken, and with heartfelt appeals.

For I give you good precepts. The father had confidence in his instruction, no doubt because it was based in Scriptural wisdom. Confident that he spoke good doctrine, he could exhort them, “do not forsake my teaching.”

- ³ When I was a son with my father,
tender, and my mother’s favourite,
⁴ he taught me, and said to me,
‘Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live.
⁵ Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away
from the words of my mouth.

Proverbs 4:3-5

When I was a son with my father. Solomon tenderly remembered the lessons his father had taught him. This would be a special remembrance of any son with any father, but all the more so when it is considered that Solomon’s father was King David, the greatest of Israel’s earthly kings.

My mother’s favourite. First Chronicles 3:5 indicates that Bathsheba had other sons through David, but Solomon was her special son, God’s chosen heir to the throne of Israel. Bathsheba made a heartfelt plea to David when his eldest surviving son Adonijah made a bid to succeed his father: <<*Bathsheba bowed and did obeisance to the king, and the king said, ‘What do you wish?’ She said to him, ‘My lord, you swore to your servant by the Lord your God, saying: Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne*>> (1 Kings 1:16-17).

Let your heart hold fast my words. Before David spoke to Solomon he cultivated a receptive heart. David did not want his words to fall upon deaf ears or a hard

heart, so he addressed this first. If the king of Israel took the time to teach his children in this way, so should every father.

Keep my commandments, and live. One of the ways that David cultivated a receptive heart was to communicate the importance of his instruction. Because the teaching faithfully communicated God's truth, obedience to the commands of his father meant life or death for Solomon, just as obedience to God's commands did for the people in general: *<<I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob>>* (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

Get wisdom; get insight. Before David gave him the actual words of wisdom, he first encouraged the pursuit of wisdom in Solomon. It might be said that this is even more important than any particular piece of wisdom, or it is one of the early lessons of wisdom. Value wisdom, pursue wisdom, sacrifice for wisdom, **get wisdom** and understanding, i.e. **get insight**: *<<Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding?>>* (Job 8:10). Derek Kidner observed that get wisdom was, "A blunt way of saying: 'What it takes is not brains or opportunity, but decision. Do you want it? Come and get it.'"

Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Once wisdom is pursued and in some sense attained, it must be kept. It is possible to have wisdom for a time and then to turn away from it at a later time. In this regard something of the irony and tragedy of Solomon's life can be appreciated. King David taught him well and Solomon received the lessons, valuing wisdom so much that he asked for it above all other things, as recorded in 1 Kings 3:7-12. Ironically and tragically, late in life Solomon did turn away from the path of wisdom; refer to the account in 1 Kings 11:1-13. Even the best lessons can, eventually, be rejected.

⁶ Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;

love her, and she will guard you.

⁷ The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,

and whatever else you get, get insight.

⁸ Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;

she will honour you if you embrace her.

⁹ She will place on your head a fair garland;

she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.'

Proverbs 4:6-9

Do not forsake her, and she will keep you. Solomon continued in his remembrance of his father's teaching to him. King David taught Solomon that if he remained on the path of wisdom, and loved wisdom, the meaning of the command to love her, it would preserve him and keep him safe.

Although at first glance the statement that the beginning of wisdom is to get wisdom appears redundant, it represents a central theme in the book of Proverbs. Notice the words of Wisdom personified in Proverbs 8:17b: <<*those who seek me diligently find me*>>. The nature of wisdom's benefits is such that the reader is encouraged to search for it and guard it continually, both because it is an invaluable treasure: <<*if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures*>> (Proverbs 2:4), <<*Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her*>> (Proverbs 3:13-15), and: <<*My child, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them 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*>> (vv.20-23), and also because humans are so prone to spiritual laziness and moral laxity. However, as is true for many themes in Proverbs, this statement is complementary to and informed by the overall framework of Proverbs that wisdom is grounded in the fear of the Lord, as described in Proverbs 1:1-7 and 9:10, and ultimately is given by him: <<*For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones*>> (Proverbs 2:6-8).

King David communicated more than the facts of wisdom; he wanted Solomon to love and value and honour wisdom. Men and women often regard money or fame or romance as the principle thing; God's people should give a higher place to wisdom.

Prize her highly, and she will exalt you. The love and pursuit of wisdom is rewarded. It brings with it honour and ornament. Early in his life, Solomon was richly rewarded for his pursuit of wisdom; refer to 1 Kings 3:7-12.

On a beautiful crown Adam Clarke commented, "A tiara, diadem, or crown, shall not be more honourable to the princely wearer, than sound wisdom, true religion, coupled with deep learning, shall be to the Christian and the scholar."

II.h Proverbs 4:10-27 - Admonition to Keep to the Right Path

The father has both taught and led by example the way that his son should follow. He gives examples of what will happen to those on the right path and to those who choose the wrong way.

II.h.i Proverbs 4:10-19 - The Two Ways

This text lays out one of the core teachings of Proverbs: the doctrine of the two ways. It asserts that there lies before everyone a choice between entering the way of wisdom and the way of folly. Which path is taken will determine the outcome of one's life. This appeal has an opening encouragement (v.10), an exhortation to take the right way (vv.11-13), a warning against taking the wrong way (vv.14-17), and a summarising review of the two ways (vv.18-19).

- ¹⁰ Hear, my child, and accept my words,
that the years of your life may be many.
- ¹¹ I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
- ¹² When you walk, your step will not be hampered;
and if you run, you will not stumble.
- ¹³ Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life.

Proverbs 4:10-13

Hear, my child, and accept my words. It seems that Solomon's remembrance of his father David's instruction ended at v.9. Now he once again speaks directly to his son, reminding him of the importance of the lessons learned.

The years of your life may be many was a promise of God given through Moses to the people who obeyed the Lord's commandments: *<<You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth>>* (Deuteronomy 11:18-21). Clarke remarked, "Vice and intemperance impair the health and shorten the days of the wicked; while true religion, sobriety, and temperance, prolong them. The principal part of our diseases springs from 'indolence, intemperance, and disorderly

passions.’ Religion excites to industry, promotes sober habits, and destroys evil passions, and harmonises the soul; and thus, by preventing many diseases, necessarily prolongs life.”

I have taught you the way of wisdom. This gives the sense that Solomon received an appropriate satisfaction in fulfilling his duty to teach his son wisdom, even as his own father had taught him. This would have guided his son well into the future, i.e. if you run, you will not stumble. Assuming it was Rehoboam that was the recipient of this teaching, he forgot the wisdom of his father’s teaching, took bad advice from his contemporaries, treated his people harshly and lost most of his kingdom as ten of the tribes broke away to form the northern kingdom of Israel. This makes the call to wisdom all the more important given the example of what happened when it is not sought and obeyed.

The image of stumbling is thematic for vv.10-19: hold on to the way of wisdom and you will not stumble and instead will avoid the path of the wicked. Their resolve to make others stumble (v.16) is reflected in their own stumbling (v.19).

Parents often work hard to prepare their children to succeed in the world - to run well in the race of life: <<*Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it*>> (1 Corinthians 9:24), and: <<*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God*>> (Hebrews 12:1-2). Without also working hard to impart God’s wisdom to their children, Christian parents may set them to run, but also to stumble and to be hampered.

Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life. Again, Solomon emphasised the value people of God should have for wisdom. They should regard the love and pursuit of wisdom to be a life or death matter. They must take firm hold of wisdom because so much works to make them let go of it.

14 Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of evildoers.

15 Avoid it; do not go on it;
turn away from it and pass on.

16 For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;
they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.

17 For they eat the bread of wickedness

and drink the wine of violence.

¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

¹⁹ The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what they stumble over.

Proverbs 4:14-19

Verses 14-17 warn against turning to the way of the wicked (vv.14-15) by describing how it creates an insatiable and destructive hunger (v.16). That hunger is perpetuated by what the path offers those who walk along it: the bread of wickedness and the wine of violence (v.17).

Do not enter the path of the wicked. Solomon told his children to keep from starting on the path of the wicked. If a way is never entered, it never has to be remedied. Clarke stated, “Never associate with those whose life is irregular and sinful; never accompany them in any of their acts of transgression.”

Do not walk in the way of evildoers. If, through foolishness, the path of the wicked is entered, then one’s steps should turn from it as soon as possible. With urgency, wisdom speaks and says avoid it and turn away from it, as Jesus would later teach: *<<Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it>>* (Matthew 7:13-14). Every further step on the way of evil makes it more difficult to depart from that path of the wicked.

For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong. Those on the path of wickedness are committed to their sin. They will sacrifice sleep and money and dignity and freedom to do their evil. They do not rest comfortably, i.e. they are robbed of sleep, unless they draw others on to their own path of wickedness. Sin becomes their food and drink, their bread and wine. Kidner observed, “The Bible does not hide the fact that one can become as zealous for evil as for good.”

The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn; is the way of wisdom (v.11).

Dawn, full day. The image here is of ever increasing brightness, from first light until noon. The path of a person refers to the moral orientation of his or her life: *<<Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths>>* (Psalm 25:4), and: *<<he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones>>* (Proverbs 2:7-8). It is this that shines brighter and brighter, i.e. keeps increasing in the way in which it displays God’s light: *<<the precepts of the*

Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes>> (Psalm 19:8), <<Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path>> (Psalm 119:105), <<The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple>> (Psalm 119:130), and: <<For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life>> (Proverbs 6:23). This contrasts with the way of the wicked (v.19), which is the way of evildoers (v.14). The person whose life is oriented toward evil will stumble through life in deep darkness. Clarke commented, “The path of the wicked is gloomy, dark, and dangerous; that of the righteous is open, luminous, and instructive. This verse contains a fine metaphor; it refers to the sun rising above the horizon, and the increasing twilight, till his beams shine full upon the earth.”

The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what they stumble over. Considering where each path leads should help a man or woman make the right choice. One of the tempter’s chief strategies is to hide the consequences of a chosen path, whether it is the path of the righteous or the way of the wicked.

II.h.ii Proverbs 4:20-27 - Maintain a Heart of Wisdom

This appeal consists primarily of imperatives that encourage the son to attend to wise instruction and guard wisdom’s presence in his heart (vv.20-21 and v.23a) by turning from evil in speech and actions (vv.24-26a and v.27). That is because wisdom brings health (v.22) and continues to sustain (v.23b), and secure (v.26b), the path of the one who does this.

- ²⁰ My child, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
- ²¹ Do not let them escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
- ²² For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
- ²³ Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.

Proverbs 4:20-23

My child, be attentive to my words. The lessons of wisdom can be given but never received. Solomon often exhorted his son to pay attention and to keep the lessons of wisdom before his eyes. Verses 20-27 make mention of the body at least eleven

times, i.e. eyes, feet and heart are mentioned twice, and ear, flesh, mouth, lips and eyelids once each. It is a section that speaks powerfully as to how Christians can dedicate each part of their body to wisdom and God's honour. Later the apostle Paul wrote of yielding the parts or members of the body to God: **<<Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness>>** (Romans 6:12-13).

Keep them within your heart. Although it goes against inherited human sinful nature, people can and must cultivate a heart that loves wisdom and is focused upon it. If wisdom is regarded as only a system of rules and threats, then its purpose is never achieved. Christians should pray for and pursue wisdom in the midst of the heart.

The commands in vv.20-21 all encourage internalising wisdom. **Heart** in Proverbs regularly refers to the centre of one's inner life and orientation to God, from which a person does all thinking, feeling, and choosing. Taking words of wisdom into the heart is vital for **they are life** (v.22), and wisdom's presence in the heart is worth guarding because out of the heart flow all the thoughts and words and choices of a person's life, i.e. **from it flow the springs of life** (v.23). This wisdom is reflected in the words of Jesus: **<<For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person>>** (Mark 7:21-23), and: **<<The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks>>** (Luke 6:45).

For they are life to those who find them. God's word - communicated through the words and sayings of this father to his children - brings life and health. The pursuit of wisdom is thus rewarded.

Keep your heart with all vigilance. Since wisdom belongs in the midst of the heart (v.21), it also is necessary to keep the heart in the sense of guarding it. In the sense Solomon meant here, the heart should be kept for wisdom, guarding it against the way of the wicked (v.19). Especially from the perspective of the new covenant, which promises a new heart: **<<Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel?>>** (Ezekiel 18:31), and: **<<A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh>>** (Ezekiel 36:26), it can be said that '**keep your heart**' implies a heart worth keeping - a new heart, one worth guarding. The heart is the reservoir, and change

must begin there. If the reservoir is polluted, it does no good to fix the pipes and the valves.

With all vigilance. This implies that it is not easy to guard or keep one's heart. There will be many opportunities for a person to give their heart to a person or a path that wisdom would warn against.

For from it flow the springs of life. There is great reward to the one who guards their heart, keeping it for wisdom, as in v.21. They enjoy life flowing from their heart, like a pleasant and bountiful water spring. The unguarded heart sees a choking or restriction to the joy and pleasantness of life.

One of the great enticements to the way of the wicked (v.19) is that it is fun, pleasant, and will bring some sense of happiness. This is a lie. The same God who designed and created humankind is the God who guides them in and through his commands. Although it may not be immediately or instinctively apparent, his commands are for human happiness and good. Although guarding the heart with all diligence may mean saying a temporarily painful 'no' to excitement and enticement in the way of the wicked, the overall result is happiness, joy, and pleasantness.

²⁴ Put away from you crooked speech,
and put devious talk far from you.

Proverbs 4:24

As Proverbs makes clear throughout, **crooked speech** points one in the path of the wicked. Crooked speech includes not only dishonest speech but also any good and honest communication, e.g. a rebuke that is without the proper content, context, or purpose. Guarding the heart in wisdom includes guarding against any speech that contains elements contrary to what the Lord loves; note the numerous references to the misuse of speech as detestable to the Lord in Proverbs 6:12-19.

²⁵ Let your eyes look directly forwards,
and your gaze be straight before you.

Proverbs 4:25

The idea that the **eyes should look directly forwards** suggests resolution about remaining in the right way. Metaphorically, it suggests that when a person turns his eyes away from the path, he is apt to stumble. People often depart from the path of the just out of distraction. The blinkers used on horses do them much good, and would do many people good as well. Jesus said that for anyone to be fit for his kingdom, they must keep their eyes forward, not distracted side to side or behind:

<<Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God'>> (Luke 9:62).

²⁶ Keep straight the path of your feet,
and all your ways will be sure.

²⁷ Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

Proverbs 4:26-27

Keep straight the path of your feet. Vital to keeping the heart formed in wisdom is the need to recognise and stay on the path that will shape it further in the way of righteousness. If one would consider the destination of their present path, it would lead to much more wise living. When a person carefully ponders where they are headed, it helps them to establish a wise direction and helps them to not turn to the right or the left.

Do not swerve to the right or to the left refers to both attending to where the path of your feet is going and seeking to stay on the right path by turning your foot away from evil: <<You must therefore be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left>> (Deuteronomy 5:32), <<Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go>> (Joshua 1:7), <<Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil>> (Proverbs 3:7), <<By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord one avoids evil>> (Proverbs 16:6), and: <<The highway of the upright avoids evil; those who guard their way preserve their lives>> (Proverbs 16:17).