

Those Who Are Wise

Dub McClish

Introduction

With good reason Bible scholars classify the books of Job through Song of Solomon as “Wisdom Literature.” This is especially true of the book of Proverbs. The words *wise*, *wisely*, and *wisdom* are concentrated a total of 118 times in the American Standard Version of this not very large book.¹ Wisdom – what it means to be wise and to act wisely – is the pronounced emphasis and theme of Proverbs.

It is appropriate for the book of Proverbs to be filled with definitions, explanations, applications, and exhortations pertaining to Wisdom – we should expect no less. It came from the mind of Solomon – the wisest mere man who ever lived. God allowed him to double-dip at the spring of wisdom. When he was but a young king, God invited him to ask what he would of Him. Solomon was already somewhat sagacious, for rather than ask for riches, long life, or vengeance on his enemies, he asked for an “understanding heart” (1 Kin. 3:9). In answering his request, God said: “Behold, I have done according to thy word: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there hath been none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee” (v. 12). God endowed him with such wisdom in the fields of judicial, financial, governmental, musical, and natural history matters that his fame became legendary, not only in Israel, but throughout the world:

And Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all the nations round about.... And there came of all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom (1 Kin. 4:30–31, 34).

So king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And all the earth sought the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart (10:23–24).

However, God imparted wisdom to Solomon in matters sacred as well as secular. Of the three thousand proverbs and one thousand five songs he wrote (4:32), we have only a small percentage preserved in his books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Nothing of his efforts in the field of taxonomy has escaped the ravages of time except the bare mention that he did extensive work in this area (v. 33). Adam Clarke, in pondering why so little of what he did has come down to us, concluded:

What God judged of importance to the eternal interests of mankind, is preserved.... Others would investigate nature, and to them those researches were left. Solomon spoke by inspiration; and

therefore to him Divine doctrines were communicated, that he might teach them to man (Clarke, 2:698).

In his quaint, but forceful way, Matthew Henry also declares the source of the wisdom that permeates the Proverbs:

We now have before us a new author, or penman rather, or pen (if you will) made use of by the Holy ghost for making known the mind of God to us, writing as moved by the **finger of God** (so the Spirit of God is called), and that is Solomon; through his hand came this book of Scripture and the two that follow it, Ecclesiastes and Canticles, a sermon and a song (Henry, 3:789-90).

God then not only gave Solomon unheard of wisdom regarding mundane matters, but God also inspired his wisdom on sacred themes, resulting in the three books of the Old Testament that bear his name. Thus, that which Solomon wrote about wisdom in his book of Proverbs is wisdom as revealed and defined by God.

Who Are “The Wise”?

Wise and Wisdom Defined

The Hebrew adjective, *chakam*, is behind our English word *wise* in many passages. The word was originally associated with skill in workmanship rather than to general sagacity or good sense and judgment: “The *chakam* in secular useage signified a man who was a ‘skillful’ craftsman” (Unger & White, 473). Thus Bezalel, Oholiab, and others were “wise-hearted” in their skills and artifices so as to be able to produce the intricate details necessary in making the tabernacle. Because of these unusual skills they are called “wise”: “And all the wise men, that wrought all the work of the sanctuary, came every man from his work which they wrought” (Exo. 36:4).

This word also is used in reference to men who practiced the black arts of divination, magic, and sorcery. Thus, Pharaoh called his “wise men and sorcerers” who “also did in like manner with their enchantments” (Exo. 7:11; cf. Isa. 44:25). Of course, God is set forth as the One who is ultimately wise: “Yet he also is wise, and will bring evil, and will not call back his words, but will arise against the house of the evil-doers, and against the help of them that work iniquity” (Isa. 31:2). To be wise by God’s definition is to have understanding, to seek knowledge, and to use these faculties skillfully to make right choices.

The Hebrew noun, *chakemah*, meaning “wisdom,” is obviously in the same word family as *chakam*, cited above. Wisdom is what characterizes wise men, whether they are naturally wise or thus specially endowed by God (as was Solomon). God filled with wisdom the craftsmen who made the priestly garments and helped manufacture the tabernacle (Exo. 28:1-3; 31:2-6; 36:2), and this is the

reason they were called “wise.” In these passages we see again that the wisdom described artistic skill and craftsmanship.

However, this term is most frequently used in relation to propitious judgment and good choices: “*Chakemah* is the knowledge and the ability to make the right choices at the opportune time” (Unger & White, 475).

Wise and Wisdom Described

If content is a clue, one of the great aims of the book of Proverbs is to so describe the characteristics of true wisdom that the reader will diligently desire and seek them. Consider the following descriptions of those who are wise:

1. They will hear and increase in learning; they have understanding and seek sound counsels (Pro. 1:5; 8:33; 9:9; 10:8, 14; 12:15; 13:1; 15:31; 18:15; 19:20; 20:18; 21:11; 22:17; 23:19; 24:5–6).
2. They are humble (3:7; 26:5, 12, 16; 26:12; 28:11).
3. They plan ahead and are industrious and cooperative (6:6–8).
4. They are not afraid of hard work (10:5).
5. They control their tongues (10:19; 12:18; 14:3; 17:28).
6. They win souls (11:30).
7. They have pure principles (13:14; 15:2, 7).
8. They know the value of associating with wise people (13:20).
9. They fear and avoid evil (14:6).
10. They are concerned about honoring their parents (15:20; 23:15, 24; 27:11; 28:7).
11. They will obey civil authorities (16:14).
12. They do not imbibe strong drink (20:1).
13. They punish the wicked if they are in authority (20:26).
14. They accept and profit from reproof when it is due (25:12).
15. They do not trust in riches (28:11).
16. They are peacemakers (29:8).
17. They control their anger (29:11).

Note that the greatest emphasis is on the qualities of hungering for knowledge, demonstrating understanding, and seeking wise counsel. Only those who are humble, also greatly emphasized, will follow this path.

Solomon also describes wisdom in considerable detail, and, as one would expect, it overlaps with the descriptions of those who are wise. Wisdom is described as follows:

1. Reverence for and recognition of Jehovah (1:7; 2:6–7; 9:10; 15:33; 21:30).
2. Understanding (2:2; 4:5, 7; 5:1; 7:4; 8:1; 10:13, 23; 14:6, 8, 33; 15:21; 16:16; 17:16, 24; 19:8; 23:23).

3. The source of great blessings (2:10; 3:13).
4. Something we should keep ever before us (3:21).
5. The most important thing (4:7).
6. The way of uprightness (4:11; 10:31).
7. That which has incomparable value (8:11; 16:16; 23:23).
8. A builder of a strong house (9:1; 24:3).
9. Discernment (10:13).
10. Humility (11:2).
11. Being well-advised (13:10; 18:1; 23:4).
12. That which causes children to honor their parents (29:3, 15).

By far the one word most frequently used to describe wisdom is *understanding*. Wisdom, therefore, does not consist of superior intelligence or of an abundance of knowledge in many disciplines. Rather, it has to do with understanding how to inter-relate the various items of knowledge we possess and then apply and use these in prudent judgments and words. However, even this faculty, if confined to the secular realm, does not adequately describe wisdom. Solomon also made a strong connection between wisdom and reverence toward and recognition of God. This attitude cannot be severed from respect for and submission to the revealed will of God. Hence, in another place Solomon wrote: "This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard: fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecc. 12:13). We should not wonder, after seeing it defined and described, that wisdom is called the "principal thing" and that it should be valued above gold and precious stones. **Solomon's Wisdom As Applied To Youth**

Solomon stated at the beginning of this great wisdom book that his purpose in writing was to impart wisdom to a young man, his son in particular: "To know wisdom and instruction; To discern the words of understanding; To receive instruction in wise dealing, In righteousness and justice and equity; To give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion" (Pro. 1:2-4). He addressed his admonitions and pleas specifically to "my son" or "my sons" twenty-seven times. He makes an application of inspired wisdom to "sons" in general an additional twelve times. Even when the immediate context does not make it evident, we should understand that this book in its entirety is meant principally for Solomon's instruction of his son. What he said to his own son is of equal value to every young person.

Solomon's Categories of Emphasis

In his inspired admonitions, Solomon dealt with several very practical areas of life every young person must face. We will now examine the major categories of these in order of their occurrence in the text:

1. Warning against influence of evil companions (1:10; 4:14-17; 13:20; 22:24-25; 24:1-2, 21-22; 29:24).
2. Warning against greed (1:12-19; 10:2; 11:24, 26; 15:27; 21:6, 25-26; 22:16; 23:4-5; 28:25; 30:8-9).
3. Warning against disrespect for parents (2:1-4; 3:1; 4:1-2, 10-11, 20-21; 5:1, 7; 6:3, 20; 7:1-4, 24; 8:32; 10:1, 8; 13:1; 15:5, 20; 17:2, 25; 19:13, 26; 20:20; 23:15, 19, 22, 24-26; 27:11; 28:7, 24; 29:3; 30:17).
4. Warnings against not fearing God and blessings of fearing Him (2:5-15, 20-22; 3:21-26; 4:12-13; 9:10; 10:27; 24:21; 29:25).
5. Warning against temptation by evil women (2:16-19; 5:3-23; 6:24-35; 7:5-27; 9:13-18; 22:14; 23:27-28; 29:3; 30:20; 31:2-3).
6. Warning against pride (3:5-7, 34; 6:17-11:2; 13:10; 14:3, 15:25, 33; 16:5; 18:11-12; 21:4, 24; 22:4, 18-19; 25:6-7, 14, 27; 26:12; 27:1-2; 28:11, 25; 29:23; 30:32).
7. Warning against laziness (6:6-11; 10: 4-5, 26; 12:24, 27; 13:4, 11; 15:19; 18:9; 19:15, 24; 20:4; 21:25; 22:13; 23:21; 24:30-34; 26:13-16).
8. Warning against an unrestrained tongue (6:12, 17, 19; 10:11, 13-14, 18-21, 31-32; 11:9-13; 12:6, 13-14, 17-19, 22, 25; 13:3; 14:3, 25; 15:1-2, 4, 7, 23, 26, 28; 16:24; 17:4, 7, 20, 27-28; 18:4, 6-8, 13, 20-21; 19:1, 5, 9; 20:15, 19; 21:6, 23; 22:11; 23:9, 16; 24:2, 26, 28-29; 25:9-11, 14-15, 18, 23, 25; 26:20-26, 28; 28:23; 29:5, 11, 20)..
9. Warning against dishonesty (6:17-18; 11:1; 12:17, 19-20, 22; 13:5; 14:5, 25; 16:11; 19:5, 9, 22, 28; 20:7, 10, 14, 17; 21:6, 28; 22:28; 23:10; 24:26, 28; 25:18; 26:24-26, 28; 27:5-6; 28:8, 21; 29:5, 24; 30:8-9)
10. Warning against strong drink (20:1; 23:20-21, 29-35; 31:4-5).

Solomon's List by Priorities

From the foregoing listing we can observe some significant emphases. While all these warnings are mentioned often enough to deserve our attention, we might get a better perspective on the relative emphasis Solomon gave to them by listing them according to the amount of emphasis each one received, from greatest to least:

1. Warning against an unrestrained tongue.
2. Warning against disrespect for parents.
3. Warning against dishonesty.
4. Warning against pride.
5. Warning against temptation by evil women.
6. Warning against laziness.
7. Warnings against not fearing God and blessings of fearing Him.
8. Warning against influence of evil companions.
9. Warning against greed.
10. Warning against strong drink.

Perhaps there is not enough data here to deduce that the most serious temptation for young people in the days of Solomon (cir. 1000 B.C.) was failure to control the tongue. However, the law of Moses was very specific about one area in which young people must control their tongues—in regard to their parents. The direst consequences awaited one who disregarded this law.

And he that curseth his father or his mother, shall surely be put to death (Exo. 21:17).

For every one that curseth his father or his mother shall surely be put to death: he hath cursed his father or his mother; his blood shall be upon him (Lev. 20:9).

Misusing the tongue to curse one's parents is one concrete way to show disrespect for them, which is the subject of Solomon's second most frequent warning. Besides cursing parents, the law also deals with other forms of disrespect for them, and with the same penalty—capital punishment:

And he that smiteth his father, or his mother, shall be surely put to death (Exo. 21:15).

If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, that will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and, though they chasten him, will not hearken unto them; then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; and they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones: so shalt thou put away the evil from the midst of thee; and all Israel shall hear, and fear (Deu. 21:18-21).

Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen (Deu. 27:16).

One could go down the remainder of the list above and cite passages from the Pentateuch that proscribe each of these behaviors and that attach various penalties to them. What we see then in the statement of these warnings in Proverbs is Solomon's intention to strongly emphasize these principles of the law to his son. He knew that these principles would protect his son from many dangers and sorrows, would provide him the happiest possible life, and most of all, would produce a life that would please both his earthly and his heavenly Father.

It is important to note that these warnings are also found in the New Testament, which means that it is still necessary for us first to heed them for ourselves if we are parents and then teach them diligently to our children. In other words, it is no less necessary for parents of this generation to teach these principles of moral conduct to its children than it was for Solomon to teach them to his son.

Current Applications

Human nature changes very little through time. When we observe the warnings Solomon issued to his son, we can see that, while the world was much different in his day in many ways, yet

many things were the same. Parents were concerned about the behavior of their children. They were concerned about the happiness and safety of their children. They wanted their children to live so as to make their parents rejoice rather than mourn. Although Satan has invented many more snares and temptations since Solomon's day, one can still see that every one of the items in the list above is very much present in the modern world. Space limitations will allow us to give attention to only the first two of these.

The Unrestrained Tongue

One of the saddest sights and sounds to the ears of the righteous is that of a child using its tongue to berate others, but especially its father or mother. The only thing sadder may be watching a parent take such verbal abuse and do nothing to stop it. Saddest of all is to see Christian parents who allow their children to thus speak to or even scream at them.

The pattern of the unrestrained tongue often starts at a very young age. Mommie tells little three-year old Suzie to go take a nap, and little Suzie says "No" and keeps on playing. Mommie ignores her for a few minutes, and then tells her again, and Suzie says, "No, no, no." Mommie waits longer and tells her once more, and she still says "No." Such behavior that is often thought cute in a three-year-old is not cute at all when little Suzie is saying "No" and still getting by with it at twelve or fourteen. The lamentable fact of the matter is that there are millions of children who have been allowed (should we say, encouraged) thus to form a pattern of unrestrained speech.

Ordinary speech in our nation has degenerated since my childhood to an unprecedented level of coarseness and vileness. When I was a child, it was only the generally recognized bad boys and girls from the other side of the tracks who dared do such things as smoke a stolen cigarette or use even the comparatively (by today's standards) mildly vulgar words. However, now it is not uncommon to hear children using words in their everyday speech that would have shocked sailors two generations ago. Such words are so common and pervasive as to be almost inescapable.

Those, even if they are not Christians, who have any refinement and standards of decency, find these vulgarities most unpleasant to hear. However, the vulgarity (and unpleasantness) seems somehow magnified when it comes from the mouths of the young, as it so often does nowadays. They have more sources than ever in current culture from which they can learn profane and vulgar terms and hear them constantly used. The entertainment (TV, movies, music) and sports worlds are principal among these sources, but tragically, parents themselves are another major source. Many of today's

parents were not taught to control their tongues when they were children, and they have carried these speech habits into parenthood. When parents use vulgar and unseemly terms in the presence of their children (and do not restrain their children from imitating them), we can expect filthy-mouthed youngsters.

Profanity refers to making common or unholy use of sacred things or terms. One engages in profanity when he uses *God* and *Christ* as words by which to curse or swear, as is so frequently done in modern vernacular. However, perhaps an even more frequent employment of them in recent years is as common words of exclamation, surprise, and excitement. Those who so speak obviously do not even think about what they are saying. Profanity is almost inescapable, and vulgarity is not far behind. Consequently, millions of children have grown (and are growing) up in our increasingly secular society knowing little more about the precious names of God and His Son except their use of them as profanities.

While we hear few Christians uttering vulgarities, unfortunately, many (both men and women, including parents) just do not “get it” when it comes to profanity in their speech. So we hear them saying such things as, “Good Lord,” “Oh my Lord,” “Lordy mercy,” “Jesus Christ,” “hallelujah” (i.e., “praise the Lord”), or other terms that profane and take in vain the high and holy names of our God and His Son. They compound their sin when they thus abuse these sacred names in the presence of their children or the children of others. God’s people should banish even the epithets for profanity and vulgarity from their speech and from that of their children (e.g., “gosh,” “golly,” “gee,” “gee whiz,” “darn,” et al.).

The New Testament is explicit in its teaching concerning purity of speech and control of the tongue:

Let no corrupt speech proceed out of your mouth, but such as is good for edifying as the need may be, that it may give grace to them that hear (Eph. 4:29).

If any man thinketh himself to be religious, while he bridleth not his tongue but deceiveth his heart, this man’s religion is vain. (Jam. 1:26).

We who are parents have the responsibility of nurturing our children in the chastening and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:1). This certainly includes teaching our children, both by example and precept, to restrain and control their tongues. Both for us and for them, the Lord said: “For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned” (Mat. 12:37).

Disrespect for Parents

The issue of children's respect for their parents was not confined to the days or family of Solomon. It is age-old and on-going. The Bible emphasizes parental righteousness and its effect upon children. God set forth faithful Abraham as a model for all parents when He said of him:

For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of Jehovah, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him (Gen. 18:19).

Jehovah intended that succeeding generations follow the noble example of Abraham:

For he established a testimony in Jacob, And appointed a law in Israel, Which he commanded our fathers, That they should make them known to their children; That the generation to come might know them, even the children that should be born; Who should arise and tell them to their children (Psa. 78:5-6).

God also emphasizes the need for parents to train and discipline their children so as to engender respect toward them. Solomon therefore counseled parents:

A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children; And the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the righteous (Pro. 13:22).

The rod and reproof give wisdom; But a child left to himself causeth shame to his mother.... Correct thy son, and he will give thee rest; Yea, he will give delight unto thy soul (Pro. 29:15, 17).

Therefore, when the Bible emphasizes the respect parents are due from their children, it assumes that the parents are (1) righteous role models and (2) that they practice consistent discipline and training in the home. These factors enable children to perceive that their parents are worthy of respect, and under normal circumstances, will have such respect. The case of Eli and his sons proves that righteousness in the parent, without accompanying discipline, may be woefully insufficient to produce faithful children (1 Sam. 2:27-36; 3:13-14). Likewise, parents who are strict disciplinarians, but who live ungodly lives, will rarely succeed in instilling God-pleasing character in their children. Paul forever ties these two essential elements together:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother (which is the first commandment with promise), that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but nurture them in the chastening and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:1-4).

Our day is one in which both of the above premises are sadly lacking in parents. Humanistic social engineers have been able to put in place policies at the federal level that have had devastating effects upon the fundamental institutions of marriage, family, and home. This sad set of circumstances has its roots in the early 1960s when "no-fault" divorce laws began to be enacted by most states. Then

the “sexual revolution” came along in the later part of that decade, which encouraged the barnyard sexual promiscuity, resulting in the destruction of countless marriages and families. In typical liberal idiocy, to cope with the results of the explosion of sexual freedom, the education establishment decided to treat this cancer with the band-aid of sex education. The only problem with this was that the band-aid was terribly infected. Would we tell youngsters not to engage in pre-marital sex? Oh no! To teach abstinence would be “judgmental.” So they just taught them how to do it better and “safer” – since it was assumed they were going to do it anyhow.

At the same time, liberal politicians in Washington gave us the “Great Society,” which has been anything **but** great for society. Under its policies, millions of unmarried mothers were rewarded financially in direct proportion to the number of children they bore. A burgeoning divorce rate coupled with the reward factor for producing children out of wedlock, has had a crippling effect upon the sanctity of marriage and the purposes for which God established the home from the beginning.

All these factors combined resulted in a deluge of pregnancies, millions of which involved children giving birth to children. Something had to be done! The solution? Since we can’t prevent them, we will just kill them! Thus in *Roe v. Wade*, without doubt the most insidious and consequential piece of legislation from the bench the once-honorable Supreme Court of the United States has ever handed down, the horror of abortion was given legal sanction. This measure is the classic example of treating the symptom instead of the disease. In the thirty-one years since this legislation was decreed more than 44 million innocent babies have been murdered. We can almost hear their voices joining those of the martyrs of Revelation 6:10: “And they cried with a great voice, saying, How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” Let us never doubt that their innocent blood shall be avenged by a Holy God.

When I was a youngster, it was only the children of Hollywood who might have two stepmothers and three stepfathers besides their mothers and fathers who gave them life. I suppose there are now millions in our nation alone who have escaped the abortionists’ bloody hands and who have no way of even knowing who their fathers and/or their mothers are. At least one generation of such children has now grown to adulthood and has produced a generation like itself to a large degree. All of this, thanks in large part to the marvelous sexual revolution that has turned the morals of our nation topsy turvy.

This moral and structural breakdown has produced the “one-parent” family and the “latch-key child.” It has spawned the day-care centers in which precious children from infancy through their

fourth year are turned over to the **real** parents – minimum-wage employees who have little or no training and no emotional investment in the little ones they supervise. At worst these parental substitution facilities produce horror stories of sexual and physical abuse and neglect, and even death. At best, they have far more influence on the child than parents who leave them there can possibly have.

These hedonistic and humanistic forces have enabled the homosexual sub-culture to become so powerful that it poses a threat to the moral undergirdings of our nation equal to that of abortion. It has risen to its disproportionate place of influence due in large part to utterly biased and undeserved sympathetic treatment by the broadcast and entertainment industries. The practitioners of this almost unspeakable evil (God labels it an “abomination” [Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26–27]) wants more than mere tolerance and acceptance. It seeks domination. It demands recognition as an honorable and respected way of life. Its attempt to force its way of life into the sacred realms of “marriage” and “family” as defined by God is a further threat of gargantuan proportions to these basic institutions of civilized society.

In just such a wicked world as ours, the Bible still teaches parents to live properly before their children and train and discipline their children, to make of them children of God. More and more we parents and grandparents can sympathize with Mr. and Mrs. Noah and the odds they must have faced in rearing Shem, Ham, and Japheth to respect them and the law of God. Their case demonstrates that we can still do it, even in an environment that is increasingly not only secular, but decidedly morally irresponsible.

Among the numerous statements of sage instruction and advice Solomon addressed to parents and to children, Proverbs 22:6 may be the most familiar: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it.” This passage has been quoted innumerable times to advance the idea that, if parents teach their children as they should, those children will absolutely and always remain steadfast in the faith. Countless sermons have been built upon thus interpreting Solomon’s words. However, if this is the meaning of the passage, we apparently have at least one Scripture that teaches the impossibility of apostasy. Further, this application of the passage implies the cancellation of the free will of that child to reject, in later years, his upbringing. This passage may be one of the most misunderstood and frequently misapplied statements in the Bible.²

Some, citing this proverb, have been quick to judge parents whose offspring went astray after leaving home. The stubborn, undeniable fact remains, however, that many dedicated Christian parents, who did all within their power to rear their children to be stalwart citizens in the kingdom, have

suffered the agony of seeing them rebel against and renounce that sound teaching and example. Further, we can frequently observe the circumstance in which conscientious parents provided **identical** spiritual instruction, environment, and example for a plurality of children, but with great sadness, saw one or more reject it all in later years, while his siblings remained steadfast. The passage does **not** say or mean, as Matthew Henry (*Commentary*) suggests it might, “when he is old, **it is to be hoped**, he will not depart from it.” Rather, the promise is stated as an unqualified certainty instead of as a mere general, hoped-for principle. How is this apparent paradox explained?

As discussed above, without controversy God’s Word teaches parents to indoctrinate their children with its spiritual and moral principles (Gen. 18:19; Deu. 6:4-9; Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20-21; Tit. 2:3-4; et al.). Christian parents who neglect this responsibility have no valid excuse. But is this what Solomon was discussing in Proverbs 22:6? Not only many brethren (as noted above), but some commentators believe it is (e.g., Adam Clarke, Matthew Henry). However, *Pulpit Commentary* states a different view of the intent of this verse: “This [duty of spiritual nurturing] is a very true and valuable rule, but it is not what the author [Solomon] intends” (9:422). The late Guy N. Woods says of the common application of this passage: “This is far – very, very far – from what the verse either says or teaches” (192).

Perhaps some additional translations will help demonstrate the force of Solomon’s injunction. Keil and Delitzsch render the passage, “Give to the child instruction conformably to His way; so he will not, when he becomes old, depart from it” (6:221). Young’s Literal Translation reads: “Give instruction to a youth about his way, Even when he is old he turneth not from it” (409). F. C. Cook (*Barnes’ Notes*) states that *the way he should go* would be better rendered, “according to the tenor of his way” (62). *Pulpit Commentary* states that the Hebrew literally says, “Initiate a child in accordance with his way” (422).

Keil and Delitzsch believe that Solomon was urging parents to suit their instruction and training to the age and maturity level of each child. Others (Woods, Cook, Pulpit) aver that *his way* or *the way he should go* refers to discovering the child’s disposition, natural capacities and aptitudes, and individual personality traits, and then customizing the child’s rearing and education to those traits. I have believed for many years that this is the message of Proverbs 22:6. Instruction and rearing thus given in harmony with the child’s natural attributes becomes so much a part of the child that it is almost innate – creating a “second nature” that lasts a lifetime.

Woods points out in his comments on this passage that people almost universally – and erroneously – take *when he is old* to mean *when he is grown* or when the child reaches adulthood (192).

Rather, this statement means what it says about **old age**, and emphasizes the practical impossibility of finding one who has lived a long cultural, moral, spiritual, or employment life pattern, abandoning it in his declining years.

Obviously, the chances of seeing their offspring mature into stalwart saints as they leave the parental nest to make their own ways are **infinitely increased** if parents have imbued them with Truth and righteousness from their early years (2 Tim. 1:5, 3:14–15). However, the most conscientious training in spiritual and moral principles that godly parents can give brings no guarantee that the child receiving it will remain faithful to it. This fact should not discourage parents from doing their utmost to fulfill their responsibility in this regard, however.

The Bible **does not** teach (implicitly or explicitly), either in Proverbs 22:6 or any other place, the impossibility of apostasy or the cancellation of free will under certain circumstances. When one argues an application of this passage that implies either of these heresies, he must know that something is dreadfully wrong with his interpretation. Godly parents who did their best by the spiritual training of their children, only to see them later apostatize to false religion or immorality, have no cause for self-blame or guilt. Those children are still individuals with all the powers to choose their courses that God gave us all as human beings, and they can – and sometimes do – choose darkness over light. Brethren are as uncharitable as they are misguided when they harshly judge righteous parents who have suffered the misfortune of seeing their adult children go astray.

Conclusion

Solomon's inspired words are as fresh and alive (and as needed) today as they were when they came from his inspired pen. Young people can do no better than to read this magnificent depository of wisdom once a month. It will spare both them and their parents many a heartache and woe if they have the wisdom to follow it.

God directly and immediately infused Solomon with wisdom in this very special case. He likewise endowed certain ones in the first century with a miraculous gift of "the word of wisdom" (1 Cor. 12:8) till such a time as His revelation was completed (13:8–13). James encourages us to pray for wisdom, with the promise that God will give it to us abundantly (Jam. 1:5). However, we will wait in vain if we expect to receive it in some direct way as Solomon and as the saints in the first century did. Solomon revealed to his son how God gives wisdom to all who ask for it, apart from a miraculous bestowal, which ceased almost two thousand years ago. God answers our prayers for wisdom through:

1. Study and application of Holy Writ, the ultimate source of all true wisdom: “For Jehovah giveth wisdom; Out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding” (Pro. 2:6).
2. Association with and learning from those who are wise: “Walk with wise men, and thou shalt be wise; But the companion of fools shall smart for it” (Pro. 13:20).

May we all, whether young or old, reject the foolish and damnable “wisdom of the world” (1 Cor. 1:20–25) in favor of “the wisdom that is from above” (Jam. 3:17).

Works Cited

- Clarke, Adam, *Clarke’s Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, n.d., reprint), 2:698.
- Cook, F.C., ed., *Barnes’ Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983 reprint, “Heritage Edition”).
- Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 3:789–90.
- Keil, C.F., and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., n.d.).
- Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (New York, NY: fund & Wagnalls Co., Eerdmans Pub. Co. reprint, 1950).
- Unger, Merrill F. and William White, Jr., eds., *Nelson’s Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1980), p. 473.
- Woods, Guy N., *Questions and Answers Open Forum* (Henderson, TN: Guy N. Woods, 1976).
- Young, Robert, *Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956).

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. The material concerning Pro. 22:6 originally appeared in a slightly different form in *The Gospel Journal* (Sep. 2002): 23–25.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Annual Bristol *Gospel Journal* lectures, hosted by the East Bristol Church of Christ, Bristol, Virginia, May 16-19, 2004. and it was published in the book of the lectures, *Proverbs, A Handbook for Youth*. edited by Clifford Newell, Jr].

Attribution: From *thescripturecache.com*; Dub McClish, owner and administrator.