

Proverbs, IV

Proverbs 29:18 says, “Where there is no revelation the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.” Revelation is something from God. The Hebrew word means a prophetic vision, so the verse would read “where there is no prophetic vision [...]” Where the Bible is absent the people perish is another way of saying it. Where the revelation is gone the people perish or cast off restraint. That word, which can be translated as “perish” or “cast off restraint,” is very interesting because it is the same verb that is used of the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai as Moses descended. They had tired of waiting for him and they got up and essentially went wild; they cast off restraint. When the word of God is absent or ignored, people cast off restraint, they go wild.

My wise father said that when we begin to ignore the word of God we move very quickly into absurdities. We really do not have very good sense apart from what God reveals. Therefore, where the word of God is absent the people cast off restraint. “But blessed is he who keeps the *Torah*, the law.” This refers to the law of God. It would be a great thing to hear a politician say that: “Without the Bible we will run wild. If we despise God’s revelation we will go wild as a society, but blessed is he who follows God’s instructions.” That is something we can pray for and it is something we can recognize in our own lives. If we depart from the Word of God, if we think, “I know what it says, but I have to go my own way this time. I think I know a better route this time, and I just do not want to go the right way because it looks too uncomfortable—it looks too miserable,” in casting off that restraint we do perish. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.” He will get you where you need to go, but it may be a difficult route and you may not think you can walk that path. But He knows you can and He will walk it with you. I hope in this to encourage you to value this word that we are studying. Do not take it lightly, only following it when it is convenient. Treasure it as a revelation from God and follow it even when it does not seem to make sense.

I remember one time in England my wife and I were asked to give a talk to a group of young teenagers about dating and sex. In talking to those young people we were trying to emphasize the value of waiting until marriage and restraining yourself and saving sex for marriage. A few of them in the group said, “Why?” About all we could come up with was, “God says its better that way.” But now that AIDS has increased so incredibly you can just say, “Well to do otherwise just might kill you. It is just that simple.” But those young people were thinking, “You do not buy a car without test driving it first. Why would you get married without test driving the relationship first?” Yet God says, “No, that is not the way it is going to work. That will not work best.” And believe it or not, a study has discovered that far from leading to a greater chance of success in marriage, co-habitation prior to marriage increased the likelihood of divorce four-fold. It is interesting to see how sociologists conducting an experiment discovered what God has known all along and what God has instructed us on all along if we will but follow the instructions.

Let us go to prayer and commit this time to Him.

Father, we do indeed treasure Your instructions, we treasure Your Word, and yet even as we say that we must confess before You how far we fall short of glorifying You through obedience as we ought. And yet, Lord, we thank You that You are a God of grace. You do not have a scale in the sky that is weighing up our good deeds and our evil deeds. Rather, You redeem us first through the blood of Christ and then as we are made Your children You graciously extend to us wise instruction that will teach us how to live. We want to recognize before You that even in thinking of our obedience we are not in any way thinking that we can merit Your favor. We have that already as Your children. As You have instructed us, I pray,

Father, that You would give us hearts that are desirous of obeying You, that it may go well with us and that You may bless us because we are walking in those paths that You make straight before us. Help us now in this time, Father, to use it wisely, to learn from Your Word, and to learn from one another. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I had my brother in a class one time and he asked the question, “What is a proverb? First of all, many people regard proverbs as promises from God.” It is a little dangerous to think, “This proverb is a promise to me: ‘Train up a child in the way he should go and even when he is old he will not depart from it.’ That is a promise that I cling to and God is bound by that promise. If He is a promise-keeping God, He has to keep that promise.” This is not the way we are to understand the Proverbs. Think about Proverbs 16:7, which says, “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, he causes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” Is that a promise? Did Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, invoke that promise? “Father, have I not pleased You in the way I have lived? What about Proverbs 16:7? I am getting ready to go to crucifixion.” No, this is not a promise quite in that sense. Does that mean it is meaningless? My brother goes on to say, “On the other hand a proverb in the Bible is not just sometimes true. In other words, it is not sometimes false.” There is also danger in thinking of proverbs as generally true with many exceptions, thinking of them as not being always true. Proverbs are not just generally true. They are not just generalizations, though that is often the way we talk about them. I have had a student who works in a third-world context and he said, “I have lived in a world where much of what the proverbs say about industry, wealth, and hard work is not even generally true. It is the exception in my context where hardly anyone ever gets ahead materially.” Thus the proverbs are generally false if we understand them in this way.

Therefore, instead of thinking of Proverbs as a promise from God or as only sometimes true we should think of a proverb as an insight into one facet of life expressed in a brief and catchy saying. We may be tempted to ask, “Does a proverb always come true?” But if a proverb is not a promise but rather an insight, then the better question would be, “Is a proverb always a true insight about one facet of life?” In other words, a proverb is not something that is just generally true but sometimes false. Might we not say that a proverb is always a true insight about one facet of life? Our experience of life is multi-faceted and a proverb may not account for other factors in a particular situation. Think again of Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.” The fact that that is not a promise—does that mean we can draw no comfort from it or that it cannot be an encouragement to us to be good parents? This is a true insight into one aspect of life. It is true that good parenting is wise and beneficial, and good parents lend themselves to having good children. However, that is but one aspect in any child’s life. Life is complex and consists of an intersection of a number of different aspects or facets. Therefore we cannot just point to the one aspect of a child’s life and say, “This kid had good parents and they reared him well, therefore he must grow up well.” Or conversely, and this is very dangerous, to say, “That kid did not turn out well and therefore his parents must have made gross mistakes.” That is not always the case. We can find many biblical examples that would demonstrate that.

Rather than asking, “Does a proverb in the Bible always come true?” we should simply ask, “Is a biblical proverb always wise?” Proverbs are always accurate insights into life with regard to the particular aspect of life that they address, and thus they are situational. Proverbs 26:4-5 says, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly or he will be wise in his own eyes.” The wisdom comes in knowing when to invoke verse 4 and when to invoke verse 5. A proverb is something that is to be used by the wise. It is ridiculous if you are in the kitchen in need of help and you call out to the other room, “Too many hands spoil the broth!” If you need help you could say, “Many hands make light work.” Wisdom comes in knowing when to apply

a proverb. Proverbs 26: 7 says, “Like a lame man’s legs that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.” If a proverb were simply a propositional, absolute truth—true in every situation and for all time—why would it matter whether it was espoused by a fool or a wise person? A fool could stand and read Scripture to us and we would benefit from the reading of Scripture. But why is a proverb different? It is different because it is situational and it takes wisdom to know when to apply it. A fool speaks the wrong proverbs in the wrong situations and they just lie there. They hang limp, they are useless, they do not get us anywhere. Furthermore, 26:9 says, “Like a thorn bush in a drunkard’s hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.” Proverbs in the mouth of a fool can actually be injurious. The fool who is dispensing the proverb could injure himself or others. We can do damage if we blithely go around speaking proverbs, insensitive to the particular situation to which we are applying them. Therefore, we pray for godly wisdom to know when to apply what proverb. It takes wisdom to apply the wisdom of Proverbs to the multi-faceted experiences of life.

“Do not answer a fool according to his folly.” In other words, do not allow a fool to draw you into his foolishness. On the other hand, there are certain situations when a fool is pontificating and you need to answer him according to his folly. You need to make known to him the foolishness of his speech. You may even give him an ironic or sarcastic answer that points out the folly of what he is saying, lest he be wise in his own eyes. There are situations when a person needs to be checked. There are other times when you do not want to be drawn into reducing yourself to the level of the fool.