

P *The Gospel According to*
Proverbs 3

A Christian Pilgrim's Journey
by Paul Lytle

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Father's guidance

"My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments,"

-Proverbs 3:1

Do you remember the counsel of your father?

I certainly do. I've been blessed enough to have a father who has been devoted to and caring toward his children unceasingly. I have a great deal of respect for my father, and not simply because he is my father. He is an attorney, which is not always an honorable profession, but when I used to work in the courthouse, there were several people I respect tell me that my father is one of the most honorable men in the county.

That sort of thing means a lot to me. I mean, most of us grow up thinking that our fathers can do no wrong. That's just sort of the way childhood is. But at some point you're obviously going to figure out that's not true. Well, my dad is capable of being wrong, of course. But it's wonderful to learn from others that he's the sort of man I always thought he was.

We are still close, and he still gives me advice. I always listen to it and consider it. My father and I disagree at times, as everyone does, but I can count on him to advise me the best way he knows how, and I know I can accept his advice readily.

But as blessed as I am to have the father that I do, I have a Father who is greater still, whose words will never lead me astray, and whose guidance will lead me to everlasting life. Some of you do not have an earthly father who cares for his children as I do, and maybe your vision of what a dad should be is a little fuzzy. Let me assure you, our Heavenly Father is better to you than you imagine.

When we get into trouble, it's funny how we will go to people who often have massive problems in their own lives for advice. You know, you're having relationship trouble, so you go to a friend who is in the middle of a divorce for help. Or you have money trouble, so you talk with your friend, who probably has a large balance on a credit card. My point being, we seek an answer, but we're usually seeking answers from people who don't have a clue as to how to fix things. At best, you'll find someone who is right "most of the time." I'm greatly blessed to have the father I do, but he's not always right, and I'd be a fool to just do what he says all the time. People have come to me for advice, and they'd be a fool to do everything I said too.

But God is never wrong. God never misleads. God never makes mistakes or lies. God never tempts with evil. God would be a good person to talk to about life.

And God talks back.

God divinely inspired the Bible, every word of it, to help guide us. It counsels us on all sorts of situations, mundane, familial, political, relational, religious, societal, legal, practical, intimate, and many others! And it never goes wrong. If you know Jesus, know your Bible, and follow, it will not lead you astray.

So Solomon is talking to his son, telling his son to not forget his words. But He is also guided by the Holy Spirit as he writes it, guided so that every word ultimately comes from God, and these words are Scripture, from our Father in Heaven. He is telling us not to forget His Words.

Of course, you have to know them first. You have to read your Bible.

There's good reason to. While it has God's solutions to countless problems of life, it is not a self-help book or some sort of guidebook. Ultimately, the Bible is the story of Jesus, God's only Son, who came to earth in the form of a man and died upon the Cross. Why? The Bible explains it to us. Because we have fallen short of the Glory of God. Because in greed, lust, ambition, undue anger, selfishness, and pride we have made ourselves unworthy of Him. We deserve death because of these things. But Jesus, who did not sin, died in our stead. He paid the price so we wouldn't have to.

If we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus, we will find eternal life. We will be given the Holy Spirit to guide us so we no longer are enslaved by sin. We will be forever united with the Father.

Check it out. It's a Good Book.

The connection between picking up your room and long life

[Remember the teachings of your father] “for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.”

-Proverbs 3:2

What causes death? Every so often we get a new list of the top causes of death in America, undoubtedly topped by heart disease. But that’s not really what I mean. That may be why this person or that person dies, but what is the root cause of death in general? Ultimately, the cause of death in this country or any other country is sin.

“The wages of sin is death,” the Bible tells us (Romans 6:23). When Adam ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, he simultaneously introduced sin and death into the world. On that day, he died spiritually, and some years later, he died physically. Without sin, neither event would have happened.

Since then, we have all sinned, and we are all deserving of death. Does that mean that when someone dies, God is striking that person down for a certain particular sin? I don’t think so. That certainly does happen, but I don’t think we could say, “If I hadn’t stolen that candy bar as a child I wouldn’t be dying now!” No, because we’ve committed plenty of sin, from lust to greed to ambition to selfishness to pride. We’re all guilty.

This verse tells us that if we obey the commands of our father, we will have a long life. This is part of what the verse is talking about. Since sin is the cause of death, if we can live without sin (which we can’t, but theoretically), we will not die. Don’t get too excited: it’s too late for that for you, as it is for me. We’re guilty. Let’s move on from here.

There is more to it. The Ten Commandments tells us this: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12).

Again we have this promise. We’ve already seen that we cannot be without sin. We’ve already failed at that, so what is this talking about?

In part, this verse is talking about a very practical way of having a long life: by living rightly. How many people have died because of wrong living? Certainly there are obvious examples of those who die in shootouts or from sexually transmitted diseases or drug use, or a thousand other deaths that are directly caused by behavior, but how many people have died of heart attacks because they worked themselves to death, ignoring the command of God to take a day off every week (a Sabbath)? How many add stress in their lives worrying about this or that, when Jesus tells us to leave the worrying about this world to God? How many add pounds, with all the problems that come with obesity, by ignoring God’s warnings about gluttony?

This is a general statement, because so many clean-living people die prematurely for other causes, but we should be able to see that living life at peace with others and devoted to God and family will add years.

But there is a third meaning here, and it is most important. When we obey our Father in Heaven, our lives will ultimately never end.

We have all sinned and deserve death. And while we will almost certainly die physically (unless Jesus comes back before then), we do not have to remain spiritually dead.

When Jesus died on the Cross, He took on the death that we all deserved. He took our sins upon Himself and paid the price for them. That was the only way we could stand before a Just and Holy God and not be punished.

Now that the debt is paid, we are able stand before His Throne without perishing. But we have to turn away from our old lives of sin and ask His forgiveness. Repent and believe in Jesus, and He will freely give you this life.

It is a free gift, irrespective of anything you can do to earn it. Perhaps you have lived sinfully your whole life, and you don't think you can be redeemed. But the Blood of Jesus, you can. Maybe you've lived a clean life, but you know that there are a few mistakes in your past that prove that you are a sinner like the rest of us. By that same Blood you can be cleansed. Repent and believe, and you will be saved.

Living by love

“Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.”

-Proverbs 3:3

If you had to pick a word that would sum up your behavior, thoughts, and motives for a day, what would that word be? If there were a sign around your neck with a word that summed up your motivation and desire, what would it be? Greed? Lust? Gossip? Anger? Despair?

What moves you? What drives you? What motivates you? What keeps you going during the day?

The world tells you to chase after money, sex, and power. Goodness, even some churches tell you to do chase these things. They will tell you to chase whatever makes you happy, no matter what it does to others.

The Bible tells us to love.

Wear that love around your neck so that everyone can see it openly, and so that you can be reminded of it in every turn. Write it on your heart so that every thought is just dripping with love and truth.

Love. That’s the whole thing. Jesus summed up the entire Word of God with two commands: Love God, and love people (see Matthew 22:34-40).

“Faithfulness” can also be translated as “truth.” How wonderful this word is. It tells us to love with a love that hides nothing, and never fails.

How does that sound? Does this sound like something you would want as your driving force, your motivation? Does this sound like something you would want guiding your every thought?

Maybe not. Maybe you are comfortable looking out for yourself. But what if God was like us? What if He only looked out for Himself, was only motivated by greed, selfishness, and anger? How would He respond to us? How would He respond to an ungrateful creation that only looked out for itself and refused to follow Him?

He wouldn’t react the way we would want, I’m willing to bet. Thanks be to God that He is motivated more by love. In love He sent His Son to die for us, that our sins might be forgiven on the Cross. In love He offers to forgive us by the Blood of Jesus. In love He wants us to live forever with Him, even though we don’t deserve it. In love He asks for nothing in return, but only that we repent and believe in Jesus.

Let love fill me, overflow, and never stop pouring out, for love has saved me from certain death, and so I will never mock love again.

Hated for the wrong reasons

“So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.”

-Proverbs 3:4

It seems to me that the world hates Christians for the wrong reasons, and it also loves Christians for the wrong reasons.

Why does it hate us? I turn on the news, and I hear people complaining about Christians. They say we're stuck up, self-righteous, condemning, hateful. Basically, they say, we're a bunch of jerks who are trying to ruin everyone's fun. They say we're trying to shove our agenda down everyone's throats. We're trying to force everyone to be like us.

Why do they like us? With a few exceptions, we seclude ourselves away in churches amongst Christian friends and we don't bother them. They don't like what we stand for, but even we have to admit, we don't stand for it very often. And thankfully, they would say, the number of Christians is rapidly decreasing.

So we have the image of the Christian from the world's point of view. We're self-righteous and annoying, but at least we keep to ourselves and aren't converting a bunch more people.

And this all frustrated me. In truth, the world should hate us, but not because we're stuck up and religious. It should hate us because we stand up and say, “You're not good enough! I'm not good enough! No one is good enough! That's why we need Jesus.”

They will hate us plenty when we shine the light of truth on their actions. People get upset when they get called out on the things they are doing wrong. I hate it. Someone tells me I'm wrong, I immediately jump into defensive mode. A thousand excuses come to mind when someone says, “You shouldn't do that.” But it is true that we sin. It's true that we're living our lives for ourselves rather than for God. It's true that we have earned His wrath. And we should be telling people this.

We should not do this to prove how great we are, because we're not. We sin just like everyone else does. When we tell the world about sin, it is not to call people to ourselves, but to call people to the one who saved us. I can tell you that you're a sinner, but I can't do a thing about it, just like I cannot do a thing about my own sin. But I know someone who can, and that's why I tell you about it.

So that's why the world will hate us, but this verse is talking about the way the world will love us. They should love us because we love them.

The Spirit will blossom such love in us that the world will not be able to help but to see it. Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). 1 John 4:8: “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

And what does degree of love really mean? It means that we are willing to give up our lives for that person (1 John 3:16, John 15:13).

In other words, you're going to love your neighbor so much that you will talk to him about Jesus, which will make him mad, because he doesn't want the light to shine on his deeds. But then you're going to love him so much that you'll help him fix his car, even after he cursed you out, which will make him think that maybe there's something to Jesus after all.

Both must go together. Let me be very clear on this point: You are not loving your neighbor if you never talk about Jesus. I don't care how many meals you make for him, how many repairs you do for him, or how many times you housesit. If you do not speak about Jesus, *you hate your neighbor*, because you are not offering him the greatest good in the universe. If you love someone, you will want them to have life. And without Jesus, we are doomed. We have all sinned, and in sin we are unworthy of eternal life. We have condemned ourselves eternally. Heaven is no place for lust, pride, self-righteousness, ambition, and greed, and we wallow in that mess every day. Only Jesus lived without sin, and yet died anyway. He did not deserve to die, but he died.

Because of that, we who deserve to die may live. He took our sins upon Himself and died with them. He is able to give us His Spirit so we can walk in His righteousness. If we repent and believe in Him, we will find life. I ask you to repent of your sin and trust in Jesus, for through Him we may live.

Out of control and loving it!

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.”

-Proverbs 3:5

I'm very much a plan guy. I like to have a plan. I want to know where I am, where I am going, and how I'm going to get there. I think days, weeks, and even months ahead on projects at work and home. I'm that guy.

My wife is even more of a plan person. While I will plan far ahead on work and home issues, I will at least pick a restaurant on a whim. She does not like that. She wants to know when we are going out and to where, and she doesn't like it when I cannot answer that question the day before we go.

We like to be in control. I don't think we are unusual in that. Most people like to be in control, whether or not they like to plan that far ahead. No one likes to be tossed about on every wind like an unmanned boat in a storm.

We are especially controlling when it comes to an immediate problem with someone we love. All we want to do is to fix it.

In Christianity, this is actually a problem.

See, God does not want us to worry about tomorrow, even whether we will eat or not (see Matthew 6:25-34). He wants us to trust Him to take care of it.

When we try to take control of every situation and bend the outcome to our will, we are being “amateur providences,” to borrow a phrase from Oswald Chambers. We are trying to play God. We are saying, in essence, “This situation is going to go all wrong without *my* help!”, and we forget that God is in control of all things.

Do you not know that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28, NASB)? If we believe this, then why do we feel the need to worry over every problem that someone encounters? Should we sympathize? Yes! Should we be there for that person? Yes! But in the end, we should recognize that it is God that will guide the situation, not us. And we should remind our friends of that when they are going through pain.

This does not mean we should not hurt! Jesus wept, remember. This does not mean we should blow off someone's pain. This does not even mean we should flippantly say “God is in control” and make someone feel bad for hurting. There is sin in the world. There is death and sickness. There are reasons to be sad. There are reasons to weep.

But there are also reasons to say, as Job did when Satan took all he had, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

Jesus understands what we are going through. He's been there. The worst evil the world has ever committed was committed against Him. Even though He was innocent, He was beaten nearly to death, hung on a Cross, mocked, scorned, and killed. He had done nothing wrong, and He faced death by crucifixion, one of the more torturous ways to die man has ever dreamed up.

And even that God used for the good. Through the death of Jesus, we can all be saved. By His Blood we can all be cleansed. See, we have all sinned, we have all committed evil, and because of that we could never earn heaven. But in death Jesus took the punishment for us. If we repent and believe in Him, we will be saved.

God took that terrible evil, the worst ever committed, and turned it into the greatest good this world has ever seen. That is the care and control He applies on our lives. If you are a Christian, then you are given the promise of Romans 8:28. God will use every bit of your life for your good. If you are not a Christian, become one. Repent to Jesus and ask His forgiveness. Believe in Him, and you will have this promise too.

And once you believe in Him for your soul, believe in Him for your bread too. He'll take care of us; trust Him.

Some crooked roads have | seen . . .

“In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”

-Proverbs 3:6

I'm not going to tell you life as a Christian is easier than it was as an unbeliever. It's not. A lot of preachers out there are telling you that Jesus wants to make you rich and powerful and take away all of your problems. He doesn't. We worship a homeless guy who was murdered. I'm not sure how that translates into wealth for us.

The Christian life is hard. It's a lot harder in some parts of the world than in others. In America we don't often see real persecution, not like in other countries. A lot of the difficulty we see is the struggle within ourselves, the conflict through which we become more like Christ. The Lord disciplines His children (Hebrews 12:6), much like a good parent disciplines his own, and pain often comes into our lives with the purpose of driving out sin.

So I'm not going to tell you, “Come to Jesus and have a life filled with flowers and money and hot women.”

I will say this: The life of a Christian is often a lot more clear. In the words of this verse, it is straight.

Because let's be honest, many of the messes we get into in life are because of sin. We are caught in a lie, we get our girlfriend pregnant, we steal, we start yelling at people in traffic, we demand respect from everyone, we get into feuds with coworkers over small misunderstandings. Everywhere we turn there is a reason to get angry, demanding, lustful, and upset.

Or, in those cases, we can turn to God and obey Him. If someone gets angry at us, we lean on Him and let it go. If something goes wrong at work, we trust Him to work it out. We believe in His purposes, His plans, and His means, not our own. Our own plans fail almost every time, but His never do. So why would we get upset? Why would we get anxious? Why would we react badly. In all cases we would praise the Lord, for we know He will work all things for our good (Romans 8:28).

Do you see how our paths will be straightened? When we focus on God, it is not that bad things do not happen to us, because they do. It is only that the bad things will not turn us to the left or to the right. We are at peace, even in a fallen world, and even when terrible things happen.

We will feel these things. We will still cry. We will still hurt. It will still be hard, yes. But like Jesus did, we can still believe God is guiding us, even when it hurts.

What happens if we do turn from the path? What happens when we get distracted by something, when we are not guided by God in that moment? Well, that is the very reason Jesus

died. We have all sinned. We have all stepped off that path. But Jesus paid the price for our sin when He died, and if we repent and believe in Him, we will be forgiven.

It is not our own ability that keeps us on the path, but the Holy Spirit. We cannot earn our way into heaven. We have all sinned. It is only through Jesus that we can return to God. Repent and believe, and you will see that straight path again, the one that leads to life.

Don't be a wise guy

“Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.”

-Proverbs 3:7

As I get older, I'm losing that urge to tell people about what's going on in my life. I still do, to an extent, because it's important for Christians to pray for one another, but I'm much more selective about the people I tell. In the past, I'd talk a lot about this stuff, mainly because I wanted to connect with people, I wanted to feel like I was with the crowd.

Now, not so much.

The reason I've cut down on that so much is because everyone feels like it is very, very important to give me their advice. And I wouldn't mind so much if the advice were at all worthwhile. It usually isn't.

Of course, we give advice (even when it is not sought) because we think we know everything. We wouldn't say so in as many words, but think about it. How often do you give advice? How often do you *take* it? Chances are, you give advice a lot more than you take it, because you think you're all that. Me too.

There are few things more annoying in life than the person who really thinks he knows everything. You know the one. The person who is always telling the teacher he's wrong. The person who never reads the Bible, and yet will openly declare that the pastor was wrong in the sermon. Who keeps talking in the meeting so much that it lasts two hours when it was supposed to take one. Who keeps calling every day to tell you how to deal with your wife, and then complains when you didn't follow his advice.

Solomon has been telling us in the last few verses to not trust our own understanding, but to lean upon the Lord. What it comes down to is this: “Be not wise in your own eyes.”

Why not? Because the person who thinks he needs to be heard is not apt to listen.

God wants to guide us. He wants to lead us and keep our paths straight. He wants to teach us righteousness and make us more like Him. To this end He sent His only Son, Jesus, to earth to teach us, counsel us, exhort us, and die for us. In our foolishness we have sinned, and we deserve death because of it, but God loved us so much that He sent Jesus to die in our place.

If we are so full of our own supposed wisdom, we will never see our own fallen state. But let's face it. We'll all wrong more than we're right. We all walk down the wrong paths every day. We're all consumed in greed, lust, selfishness, and pride. Pride probably most of all. We all think the world needs to know what we have to say.

But if we turn away from that, repent of those sins, and believe in Jesus, we will be saved. In salvation we will be given the Holy Spirit, who is sent to instruct and guide us. To help us be wise, in other words.

Wisdom comes from God, not ourselves. The wisdom of the world has produced misery, death, war, famine, poverty, and hatred. The wisdom of God leads to life eternal.

The Bible tells us that if we lack wisdom, we should go to god in faith and ask. He does not withhold wisdom. If you would repent and believe in Jesus, then go to Him. Your prayer doesn't have to be fancy. You don't have to use "thee" and "thou." Just talk to Him. Believe, and you will find wisdom.

The theology of dad

“Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.”

-Proverbs 3:7

A good father gives us so much insight into the relationship between the Christian and God. It is unfortunate that a good father (or fathers in general) has become so rare in our society. There is so much theology that can be learned by just having dad around.

Maybe that’s why the Church has become so weak in this age. At least that’s one of the reasons. We are so confused about the way God works because we didn’t have fathers or our fathers were jerks.

The fear of the Lord is one of those things that get people worked up now. They do not understand how a loving God can and should also be feared. I don’t have an issue with it. Maybe it’s because I had (and have) a good dad.

I don’t have a doubt that my dad loves me. It never occurred to be that he didn’t. He was always there for me, always supportive, always ready to help. He is a loving father. But I also feared him. He had authority over me. It was ultimately his decision if I could go out and play ball or use the Nintendo. He could punish me, and often did. (Let’s face it – I deserved it a lot.)

I never got too full of myself in that house. I never started to think that I was in charge of the family or that my words had any sway beyond a kind and honest consideration. I never became too proud of my position there, as I am apt to do in every other area of my life. Why? Because of the fear of my dad. There is no question that my parents were in charge.

Our heavenly Father is like that. We can go to Him, talk to Him, get His advice, learn from Him. He loves us, and He wants us to go to Him with everything going on in our lives. And we should also fear Him, for He does have authority. He does have the ability and the will to chastise us. Our prayers should not be commands. Out of love He will listen and kindly and honestly consider us, but it is He who is in charge here.

Does that frighten you? It does not frighten me, because whatever punishment I received from my earthly father helped shape me into a better man. He was not doing it out of revenge or sadism, but out of love, to guide me and instruct me. I am thankful for it. So too does God guide us (and better still), sometimes through pain.

Despite our Father’s love, many of us do not fear Him, and the result is we become wise in our own eyes. We become proud. We start thinking we’re in charge of the household, when we are only children under His care. Have you seen children like that? The kind who walk over their parents as though they were the ones with authority? Such a terrible sight it is, the likes of which I have never otherwise beheld. It fills me with such sorry misery when I see it that I am left shaken for days.

Do not be so bold with our Father, because unlike some parents who do not care enough to punish a misbehaving child, our Father is worthy of reverent fear.

He is also worthy to be trusted with all things. Like a good father He is ready to forgive a wayward child as soon as that child returns home. He may punish, but He will always love. He loves so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for our sins, to take the wrath and just punishment for our sins instead of us.

Return to Him in repentance and faith, and you will find Him waiting for you with arms wide.

He's a good Dad.

The theology of navels

“It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”

-Proverbs 3:8

At one time in my life, I would have looked at this verse in a certain way. I would have seen healing and refreshment and said, “Ah, yes, so it is. When we turn to the Lord in times of trial, it is like healing and refreshment. He comforts us and gives to us peace. He guides us through the hard times, just as in Psalm 23:4, ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.’”

That’s what I would have said. And I would have been true, but rather missing the point.

And while I love the ESV translation of the Bible (which is why I use it almost exclusively now), the ESV misses it here too.

The King James Version is a bit more literal when it says, “It shall be health to thy navel.” Navel? Yep. Well, doesn’t that just mean it provides the body with healing, just like it says in the other versions? Well, yeah.

But the image here is not one of momentary and occasional healing, but of a feeding and provider through an umbilical cord. That image is so important to the verse, because if you don’t get that image, you’re going to miss what Solomon is saying.

I once saw the provision and healing of God as something we need in times of trouble, when our soul gets heavy and we become weary. Then we would turn to God and be drawn into Him, and He would heal our spiritual (and sometimes physical) wounds.

That is true, but it is more than that. God’s healing does not come like a meal – at certain times of day and to varying degrees – but it is rather like a mother’s provision for her unborn child. We are constantly connected to God, constantly being protected, guided, fed, and formed. So, yes, God is with us when we walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but Psalm 23 never tells us that this is the *only* time He will be with us.

So too is the next image. By “refreshment to your bones,” Solomon, I believe, is speaking of the constant circulation of blood through the marrow that keeps the bones strong. If you remove that source of life, the bone becomes brittle and breaks.

In other words, it is not that we should turn to Him in times of trouble, but “In all your ways acknowledge him” (Proverbs 3:6).

Guidance and provision come from God continuously. When we submit to Jesus as Lord, we are given the Holy Spirit. Not for a moment, but for the rest of our days. Hebrews 7:25 tells us that Jesus is always making intercession for us with the Father. James 1:5 tells us we can go to the Father for wisdom.

Finally, Jesus told us this, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). He is truly with us always. Though He died for us on the Cross, He rose

again, and lives still. He is eternal, and through Him we can live forever with Him. Repent and believe in Him, and you will find Him. He will not leave or forsake you, not even after death.

What do you do with your paycheck?

“Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce;”

-Proverbs 3:9

Imagine, if you will, a man. Every two weeks, as soon as he gets paid, he rushes out to the store and buys CDs and movies and video games. He does this so much, in fact, that he can't afford to pay the full electricity bill each month. He's always borrowing money for rent.

Where would you say this man's priorities lie?

You've probably met people who do this. Honestly, I used to be one in a way. When I first started working in high school, I really didn't have many expenses, so I had money all the time. I bought guitars, CDs, and such. I spent a small fortune recording a CD that is, frankly, pretty bad. I didn't save any of it. I wasn't a Christian, so I certainly didn't give any of it to the church. I spent my money on entertainment. Why? Because it was my priority.

After college, I wasn't making much money, and things were tight. But I like food, and so I found myself going out for lunch at least twice a week. I was struggling to make ends meet, but I was spending a good chunk of my salary on food. Why? Because it was my priority.

When you get your paycheck, what is the first thing you do with it? Go the lunch? Put some aside for the new car? Buy mulch for the flowerbed? Go to the movies? Where you spend your money is an indication of your priorities. If you struggle to pay the rent, but every two weeks on payday you're at the store for a particular thing, that is your priority.

The Bible tells us that God should be our priority. It often uses this word, “firstfruits.” The firstfruits are simply the first product of your work. If you are a farmer, it is the first of the season's harvest. If you get a paycheck, it is the first money out of the bank. What is the fruit of your labor? The first part of that fruit should be the Lord's.

Paul tells us more about this: “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come” (1 Corinthians 16:2). This is not a set amount that you have to pay, but as you prosper. That is to say, give in proportion to what you have been given.

We do this for a couple of reasons. The first is to acknowledge that our fruits really belong to God anyway. It is He who has blessed us with whatever we have. If you don't understand this, you won't understand giving. This is not *my* money, some of which I have to give to God. This is *God's* money, some of which He lets me keep.

The second reason we do it is out of faith that He is the one providing for us. He has promised that He will take care of us, and so, in faith that He will, we give up some of the money He has already provided to help spread His Word.

The grace of God is sufficient for us. Once we get that priority right, everything else falls nicely into place. Once we acknowledge Him as Lord, as provider, as Father, the giving of the

firstfruits is not such a hardship. It is a joy. After all, it is only by His grace that we are saved. We do not deserve heaven. We have acted selfishly, hatefully, and lustfully, and we do not deserve to be saved. But Jesus died in our place, so if we repent and believe that Jesus died for us and rose from the dead, we will find eternity.

What does that new CD compare to that? The more mercy God has shown me, the easier it is for me to give. It is the least I can do to show my love for the One who saved me from death.

The wine is a-bursting!

“then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”

-Proverbs 3:10

We're going to need to tread carefully here, since the relationship between Christianity and money is one of the most easily misunderstood and most wrongly-taught doctrines in Christendom. On the one side, we have the Prosperity Gospel, which teaches us that if we have faith, or if we pray a certain prayer, or if we claim something in God's name, we will be rich beyond belief, because Jesus died so we can have a nice job. (Literally, I heard a very famous preacher say that once. It made me want to vomit.)

On the other side, we have people who say that God hates rich people, and if you're not scrounging for every meal, you're going to hell. They believe poverty is closest to godliness, and if you want to be saved, you can't have any worldly possessions.

And both sides have passages taken out of context to support their cause.

There are rich saints in the Bible. These include Abraham, Job, David, and Joseph of Arimathea. There are poor saints in the Bible. These include Paul, Job (again), and Peter. Jesus Himself would fall into the latter group. In neither group do we have a tremendous lack of faith. It is not a lack of faith that makes you either poor or rich.

There are warnings in the Bible to be careful with riches. Why? Because it is so easy to be drawn away from a devout life when you have a lot. These warnings are similar to the warnings Paul gives against marriage, because a wife or husband can be a distraction from the Christian life. Of course, he also warns against singlehood for those whose desires would make celibacy difficult. A warning to be careful in certain situations does not mean the situation is sinful. It only means that every situation of life has dangers to sin. A rich man may begin relying on his wealth rather than on God. A poor man may start blaming God because he doesn't have enough to eat.

What this verse is talking about is stewardship. If you look at the previous verse, it is speaking about being generous in your giving. Give of what you have. Give in joy. Do not fear to give so generously, for it is God that provides your food for you, not yourself. He will take care of you; He will keep your barns and vats filled. And He will continue to take care of you, even after this life is done.

God not only provides your money, food, and clothing, but also provides a way to eternal life. In our sin we have fallen short of God's glory, but the Father's Son, Jesus, came to earth in the form of a man to die for our sins. If we repent and believe in Him, we will be rescued from our sins and live, even after we die.

It is not a promise of money. Frankly, money is a little too temporary for me to spend so much effort teaching it. I'm much more interested in things that are more eternal. It's also not a call to sell your home and move out into the street. God may be calling you to either riches or poverty, I don't know, but in either case, the call to life is worth it. This life is but a brief period of time; use it to make sure your forever is secure, not your pocketbook.

The theology of pain

“My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof,”

-Proverbs 3:11

If God loves us, why is there pain in the world?

I’ve heard this question quite a bit. It’s not a new one. James and Peter both address it in the words of Scripture. Recently, I read C. S. Lewis’ response to the same question in *The Problem of Pain*. It took him about 150 pages to answer it; let me give a quick response while talking about the next two or three verses.

I grew up thinking I was a Christian. I practiced all the outward mechanics of Christianity, including reading my Bible, avoiding sin where I could, and going to church. But it was all religion, no love. I did it because I thought that is what I had to do.

My world fell apart in my late teens and early 20s. I was really without direction, lonely, and sick of myself. I didn’t really like the religious, yet unbelieving, man I had become.

It was a painful time, but I thank God for that pain, because it roused me from my sleep and brought me before Him. See, without the pain, I would not have known that anything was wrong in my life. As pain will tell me that the stove is hot, so too did pain tell me that I needed something more out of life.

A good father will spank his child, and the child may wonder, “If my father loves me, why does he hurt me?” But we know why he does it: to teach the child, to guide him, to instruct him, to move him. It’s not out of sick pleasure he does it, but out of duty.

The pain teaches us that there is something wrong. It teaches us that we have missed the mark.

Now, the spankings of a good father will often produce a good son, but sometimes they will be twisted within the son, and the son will rebel against the punishment, claiming it was undeserved and the good father was abusive. That’s not necessarily the fault of the father, but of the son’s stubborn will. And so we sometimes react with pain in our own lives. We will stand and declare ourselves innocent, and that God has punished us unjustly.

But the Bible tells us differently. We have all fallen away from God’s glory. While we were made in His image, we have tainted His creation and gone about our own desires. We have acted out of lust, greed, selfishness, ambition, hatred, and anger. We refuse to acknowledge Him as our Lord and Creator. We think a football game is more important than worshipping God in church. How should God react to this?

If your young son acted in these ways, what would you do?

We have all sinned. We have all fallen. No one is innocent. We have all been coasting through life, attending to ourselves, to our own desires. Sometimes, God allows pain into our lives to wake us from that sleep and let us know that something is wrong.

It is better to feel the pain now than later. In sin, we all deserve to die, for that is the rightful punishment of sin. But Jesus came to earth in the form of a man to die in our place. If we repent and believe in Him, we will have life eternal.

If a little pain now can bring us from our daze and send us on our knees now, then that little pain will have saved us from eternal death.

Pain in our fingers is a warning for us to keep the rest of our body from the fire. Pain in our lives also warns us of the fire of death, and points the way to life, who is Jesus.

I know some people reading this will not think this applies to them. Some are wrong, and they are like children who deny the punishment of their fathers was just. Others are right. This answer is not a complete one, but though I am unable to give a complete answer to the question in this small space (it took Lewis 150 pages!), but maybe we can start here. Ask God to teach you the purpose of the pain in your lives. Chances are, it is trying to lead you to Christ.

Driven into waiting arms

“for the LORD reproveth him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.”

-Proverbs 3:12

You know, I was listening to a sermon series by Mark Driscoll a few months ago, and this particular sermon was on trials. Even though he set the sermon schedule a year in advance, he knew that particular was going to be rough. If a sermon on trials was coming up, it would undoubtedly be surrounded by trials. In the same way, my mother, who is a Bible study teacher, has vowed to never teach the Book of James again because of all the trials she went through while teaching about trials.

I hope no one misunderstands. This is not God punishing people for teaching certain passages. Quite the contrary! This is God timing things so that when you face trial, you're already reading the right passages. He's timing it so you see what He is doing right from His Word while He is doing it.

In my case, I had just started my little series on pain when the call came. There was a death in my wife's family. We hurried down to her hometown over the weekend for the funeral. I am writing this on the very day we got home.

Right now, my wife is on the phone, trying to comfort a family member. I really don't know whether she's going to help much or not. She is pointing to Jesus, because He is the only real comfort either of us knows. This family member will either hear the call to Christ, or think my wife is being terribly insensitive.

It has been a very painful half year for my wife, and there have been times when I have made the same plea to her. Turn to Jesus. It has been the sort of pain that could have broken her, sent her into wild depressions. It didn't. She leaned on God for strength, and now she is passing on the message of the Cross to her family.

I'm proud of her. More than that, I'm happy for her.

Pain can either turn you to the right road or the wrong road. It can either make you see the folly in your life and cause you to change, or it can make you chase folly all the more. God calls out to us through pain. In pain He tells us that all is not okay, that it is not right.

Not that He is to blame for death. That's ultimately our fault. If it had not been for sin, there would not have been death. But we sinned, and we earned death. Death is here because of us. But God can use it. God can use pain to try to reach us.

A good parent, this verse tells us, disciplines his children. This we should already know. Only the worst parents let their children grow up without boundaries, without discipline, and without consequences. We, like wayward children, have run after our own desires and lusts.

Out of love, God allows pain to come into our lives. It is through trials that we become “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4).

Like wayward children, we have a choice as to how to respond to that pain. Do we recognize our own folly? Do we realize the futility of our pursuits? Do we come to realize what is really important? Or do we run farther into ourselves?

I don't know how my wife's family will respond to her pleas tonight. I am praying that this pain will not be wasted. I am praying that this pain will drive them into the arms of Jesus.

So we begin our walk again

“Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding,”

-Proverbs 3:13

How soon we forget the very titles we give to things. My wife and I have been working through some things, causing me to take about a month off from writing these little essays. I began to wonder what place my writing could have in such a process.

I think sometimes I forget that these essays, this project, this mission is about a process, not a completion. It’s about a journey through Christian life. It is about the “pilgrimage” part of the title and not just the “Christian” part. And in truth, the two cannot be separated. I am not holy; I only follow one who is. Stuff is going to happen to me, and I’m going to react badly, and to deny that is to deny the need for Christ in the first place.

It is in trial most often that we find wisdom and understanding. It is in these times that you learn what is really important, and Who will stand beside you in all things. And these things, just as Solomon will tell us in the verses following, are more valuable than anything this world can give.

So my wife and I, through debate and prayer, decided to start the writing up again, God willing. I have much to tell you about, much that I have learned lately.

Here’s just about the most important thing I’ve learned. God chose us for an incredible gift, one that we did not deserve. He chose us for life, though we deserve death. And we so often repay that divine gift in sin, which is willfully disobeying our Lord. Such disrespect we show Him, even after He died for us. This realization shocked me, and it horrified me. I began to think about this as though God were here. Say my mother gave me a lavish gift for my birthday, and then, right in front of her, I did something I knew would make her sad or even angry. What if I mocked her right there? What if I showed disdain for the gift?

This is what we do with God. We take His gift, and then we run off immediately to disobey His commands.

The depth of my own depravity astonishes me. The darkness of my heart goes much deeper than I had thought.

And yet He loves us. Isn’t that strange? Isn’t it wonderful? And He still accepts us, not because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus has done. I suddenly thought of myself as a young student, in the principal’s office in school, in trouble again. I’m about to be punished harshly when Jesus, like a well-respected and well-behaved older brother, comes in and says, “I’ll vouch for Paul. I’m with him, and I’m helping to guide him, and we’re making progress.”

Yes, the darkness in my heart runs deep, but it is a touch more shallow today than it was yesterday. God is making progress in me.

So we begin the pilgrimage anew.

Go ahead, be nerdy

“Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding,”

-Proverbs 3:13

How often do we really seek understanding? How often do we make any sort of attempt to find wisdom? I am constantly amazed by the flippancy with which we greet any sort of quest for truth.

I’ve had two conversations very recently that come to mind. One with a friend who is constantly thinking about new ways to approach church and new ideas to reach the world, and yet, to my knowledge, has never sought the counsel of God in this quest. And by that, I mean that he does not look to the Word of God for insight. Theology has become a secondary concern to the more social aspect of the question.

Surely that is important, and yet how often do we throw out understanding for lights and sound? How much sermon time do we dedicate to stories rather than the Word? We stopped seeking wisdom at some point because it wasn’t cool anymore, and we started looking out for success.

The other conversation was about a book that depicts God in a rather distorted light. I was speaking to a friend about it, trying to warn him a little about that distortion. He did not recognize the problems, and honestly didn’t seem to care. And you know, not recognizing the problems isn’t a big deal. It only means we need to study more. Not caring though. . . .

Whenever someone finds out that I regularly study the Bible and actually enjoy it, more often than not, they scoff at the idea. Sometimes, I am openly mocked by those who say there is no God. Which I find rather funny, since here’s someone who has lived a tiny fraction of the history of time, who has seen a tiny fraction of one world that is a fraction of a star system which is a fraction of the universe, and that person is making absolute declarations about Who may be out there. That sort of arrogance borders on insanity.

I’ve regretted much in my life. I’ve regretted wasting so much time on certain activities. I’ve regretted dating certain women. I’ve regretted some classes I took. I’ve regretted about a fourth of the things that come out of my mouth. I’ve regretted eating at certain restaurants. I’ve regretted eating too many sweets in my past, because I’m having to diet now! I’ve regretted *not* seeking out wisdom. But I’ve never regretted one minute that I have spent in the Bible. I’ve not regretted one minute I’ve spent in prayer. I’ve not regretted looking up a single Hebrew word, a single time I’ve pulled a commentary off the shelf, or a single theological book. I don’t regret listening to sermons on my iPod or going to church.

I only regret that I don’t do it enough.

The people around me call me nerdy. Okay. I am pretty nerdy, so I’m cool with that. But I don’t do it for any other reason than I love God.

A husband who loves his wife seeks to understand her. He studies her: What does she like? What does she not like? What does she like to be called? What does she like to do on the weekends? And then that husband will do those things the wife likes in order to please her.

I love God, and He has given me a Book about Himself. Why would I not study it? Why would I not try to follow Him? And if I didn't, could I really say that I love Him?

God, in the form of the man Jesus, came to earth to show His love for us. He died and rose again to restore us with the Father. He bids us confess our sins and follow. Do you believe that? I tell you the truth, your life depends on your answer. Wouldn't it be rational to seek out wisdom on this subject?

Or do you think it's too nerdy to seek Him out?

Silver and gold

“for the gain from her [wisdom] is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold.”

-Proverbs 3:14

Are there more important things to you than money?

There are few people who would answer no to this question, but if we're going to be honest with ourselves, we may find that money is first in our priorities every day. How often do we neglect our own families to put in a few more hours every week?

It is the chase of something that rules our lives. It is the quest for something. It may not be money. For me, money has never had a huge allure, though there have been many times when I wanted more. And yet I'd like to pass over that to get to something a little different, because this one was a bigger issue for me.

I was always very lonely. I sought companionship and acceptance everywhere I went. It was one of my main missions in life, on my heart and mind everywhere I went.

The gain of God is better. My old loneliness does not compare with what He has been in my life.

We spend our lives chasing something. And sometimes we catch it, but it never lasts longer than the grave. We can never take it with us. At best our name is remembered for generations afterward, but a lot of good that does you when you are dead. More often than recognition, we seek wealth and comfort. There are whole theologies based on this. They tell us that Jesus died so you can get a sweet ride.

And it makes me wonder if those preachers have ever experienced God at all, because if you do, that stuff really starts to fade away in the light of something greater.

This is wisdom, that there are more important matters than the things of this world. There are more important issues than the size of my house. There are more important relationships than those with business associates, customers, or even a spouse. There are greater things to be gained than silver and gold.

Jesus, though He had everything in heaven, gave it all up out of love for us. He died on the Cross for us, because we have sinned and therefore do not deserve life. In that death, He took the punishment that was meant for us. He gave it all up, even His life, to show us something worth more than silver and gold.

If we repent and believe in Him, we will find that life. It is something that does not end when we are put into the ground. It is something that will keep us going for all time.

It's not worth it

"She [wisdom] is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her."

-Proverbs 3:15

It would be difficult for me to explain the last twelve hours of my life. Last night, I was convicted suddenly by some things I had done recently that hurt my wife very badly. She is extraordinarily gracious, and she forgave me immediately, and I was immediately sorry for the whole thing. The event itself was a few weeks ago, but last night everything came back to me. I really couldn't tell you why, but I was just astounded at the selfishness of my heart at times.

This morning I was listening to John Piper speak about Christian couples who were living together. I have several friends who are doing just that (some in separate rooms, some in the same), and most of my morning was spent in sadness over what we are doing to each other, and what we are telling the world.

Sometimes, when my wife and I start to get agitated with each other, we will tell each other this: "It's not worth it. Whatever it is we feel we need to say, whatever right we feel we must protect, whatever desire we feel has to be sated – it's not worth it."

And though we've been doing that for a while, I'm beginning to understand the truth in it better today with this verse. When I get upset over something that was done to *me*, and I feel like I have to assert myself and make things right for myself, it always seems to make it worse. Whenever I seek my own advancement, I am disappointed. Whenever I start to shout out my rights, those rights are never as sweet as I wanted them to be.

We have all sorts of desires that we think will fill us, and they never do. To address the other situation that has been on my mind today: Moving in with a girlfriend seems great for a time, until, twenty years down the road, your daughter decides to follow your example.

The truth of the matter is this. The world tells me I need and deserve a lot of stuff, and none of it is really worthwhile in the end. It falls apart, it complicates things, it destroys, it traps, it fades.

On the other hand, God never does these things. He never weakens, never tires, never fails. I never regret those days when I hold my tongue at home, even though I want to tell my wife all about the ways I deserve something. I only regret the days I do say something.

Jesus tells Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). As always, He's right. I have needed His grace for those times I've ruined everything to keep my relationship with God intact, just like I need my wife's grace in order to stay married. Without it, I'm lost. I've needed that grace to steady myself when life gets rocky. I've needed it to ground me when I'm on top of the world. I've needed it more than bread, water, and air, for even those come from grace.

I don't always follow after that wisdom. I hope I do not make Jesus look bad when I don't. More than that, I lose something when I don't, for whatever I start chasing isn't nearly good enough to replace when I'm giving up.

True riches, true life

“Long life is in her [Wisdom’s] right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.”

-Proverbs 3:16

Sometimes you sort of wish Solomon would make up his mind. He just finished telling us that we should seek wisdom more than money, and now it seems like he is saying to seek wisdom in order to get money.

These are the sorts of verses that the Prosperity Gospel preachers latch on to, and we can see why. It seems to be saying to follow God and you’ll get rich, doesn’t it? That’s pretty much what the Prosperity teachers tell us, that faith will bring God’s blessings, and God’s blessings usually come in the form of cash.

But is that really what’s going on here? If so, we would have to assume that Solomon is a moron, because he seriously did tell us a couple of verses ago that wisdom is better than gold. To make the claim that he is primarily talking about worldly wealth is to claim that Solomon is saying, “Forget about money! Money is for suckers. Get wisdom, because that will get you money!”

If you take the verse more in context you’ll see something else. In the following verses, you’ll find that the gifts of wisdom are spiritual in nature. Peace, eternal life, and blessing.

Does that mean that these two, long days and riches, are also eternal? Not necessarily. After all, it was when Solomon asked God for wisdom that God gave him riches as well. In a very literal sense, Solomon’s quest for wisdom made him rich.

And yet it was not his goal; it was not what he sought. The motive here is very important.

We have mentioned before that the Christian life is conducive to healthy living. Wise and honest business practices will often produce great wealth. Following God, in fact, can lead to worldly blessings. Sometimes they don’t, but sometimes they do. And these are not necessarily bad things. There is nothing wrong with wealth, so long as you keep your focus on God.

And so the gifts of wisdom certainly can be long life and wealth. And they can also, and more wonderfully, be something else.

If you remember from Proverbs chapter 1, this personification of Wisdom found in the Proverbs is a symbol of Jesus, and the promise of Jesus is greater still than a load of cash. Long life? What about forever? Wealth and honor? What about a house built by Jesus and rewards bestowed by God?

Here is wisdom: The things of this world will pass away. They may be useful for a time, and they are not inherently evil, but they are temporary. We, however, are eternal. We should spend this life seeking our provision for forever, not just for these seventy years.

It is the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom, for once you cast your eyes beyond death, you will begin to understand the importance of answering the question of eternity right now. Will you find favor with God upon death, or will you be judged wanting?

We have all fallen short of His glory. We have all sinned in our ambition, selfishness, lusts, hatred, and pride. We do not deserve a place in His kingdom.

But Jesus came to pay the price that we have earned. We deserve the death penalty, and He took our place there. If we repent and believe in Him, we will be saved. In that wisdom, we will have found long life (eternally) and riches in heaven.

This is what Solomon knew. Money is pretty cool to have, but what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul?

What ways are these?

“Her [Wisdom’s] ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

-Proverbs 3:17

I had rather mixed emotions coming into this section of Proverbs. These early Proverbs teach as general rules. You know, it’s like when you get a boss who tells you, “Come every day, work hard, and you’ll do just fine.” Well, as a general rule, that is true, but come to work wearing flip-flops and a Speedo, and you’ll quickly find that you’re the exception to the rule.

So I want to come to this verse and tell people, as with all Scripture, this is completely true! And it is. Proverbs, by definition, give us wisdom to guide us to desired goals. But chance has a hand in it too. For instance, obeying God may *not* bring us long life if following God means martyrdom.

But I also don’t want to tell you something that isn’t true. I’m not going to tell you that Jesus is going to give you flowers and sunshine all your days. The Christian life can be trying. In fact, there are several places in the Bible where it practically guarantees us trials (James 1, as an example). The walk itself takes us on a higher road than a normal man would walk. We are striving always to be more and more like Christ, and sometimes that means standing for the truth when a little lie would have gotten you out of the situation, standing up for morality when others laugh at you, answering His call away from everything that was comfortable, listening while your family complains that you have changed.

Sometimes His calls takes you somewhere you didn’t want to go. For many Christians, it meant going into death.

I am reminded of Jesus, praying and weeping in the Garden of Gethsemane. So much stress was He under that He literally sweat blood. After that, He was taken, beaten, scourged, tortured, and nailed to a Cross to die.

I don’t know how I would handle that. It’s hard enough telling a friend that he is seeking his own gain instead of God’s and He needs to stop it. That’s an awkward conversation, and yet one that love has to make. If you love someone, you have to tell him these things.

There are many conversations like that one that I haven’t had the strength to make. I’ve had enough people angry at me for simply talking about God, and yet so often I must, because I’m not at peace unless I do, because their lives depend on it.

Only conversations. That’s all they are. What then if I am called to death? Is that a path to peace as this verse offers?

We are not compelled to these things to earn for ourselves heaven. Only Christ can earn heaven, for the price of it is perfection – a price we cannot pay. It is only through His sacrifice that we can be forgiven, for He paid the penalty of death we deserved. So it is not for reward

that Christians leave all they have to serve. It is for love. How can we claim to love anyone if we do not try to save them from destruction?

Like Isaiah, we know that most often we will fail. We know that most will reject Him. And yet we speak, we write, we go, we serve, we love, and we die.

I have wept for those who have denied Him. I have wept for them. But you know, it's strange. The only time I weep for myself is when I did not try, when I said nothing. If I have spoken what I could, spoken truth in love, then I am content with what Christ is doing in me. I am at peace if I have tried.

Huh. Turns out this verse is true after all.

The tree of life

“She [wisdom] is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.”

-Proverbs 3:18

The tree of life. Do you remember this one? The tree of life only makes an appearance in three books of the Bible. It’s right at the beginning of Genesis, that is at the beginning of the Bible, and at the very end of Revelation, that is at the end of the Bible. The only other book to mention it is in Proverbs. This is the first of four times it appears in Proverbs.

The tree of life is first found in the Garden of Eden. Before Adam had sinned, there was no prohibition against eating from this tree. The fruit of this tree did exactly what its name suggested – it granted life.

Adam sinned by disobeying God. You know, a lot of people think that God sets rules to ruin our fun. He doesn’t. The Garden is a great example of this. He provided a paradise, a place without pain and without death. But in disobedience, it was Adam who brought darkness into that place. And in doing that, Adam ruined everything.

Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden then, not again to eat of the tree of life. Obviously, we do not have this tree around now. We don’t have the fruit of the tree to put on our cereal in the mornings. In sin we have brought about death.

It’s sometimes hard to describe just how important this concept of sin is. So many people just blow it off, thinking God will just pass over it. Which in and of itself is sin. Can you imagine your children blowing off your commands like that? Let’s say your children rebel against you in the same way you have rebelled again God (God forbid, but let’s talk about it a moment). Say they ignored every word you said, and refused to speak with you. Their lives were spent chasing pride, lust, greed, and hatred, all against your heartfelt pleas for them to change. There would probably be a time when you would just let them go make their own fate.

I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, and yet we do this to God every day. He wants to guide us in wisdom, to provide for us as a Father should, to protect us, to love us, and we go our own way, not even speaking to Him at all!

A good father says things to guide his children to a good life. The children do not always see this, but the father does. How much more does our Heavenly Father see all? How much more can He guide us along the right paths? It’s not to ruin our fun, but to bring us completeness, forgiveness, and life.

We have lost the right to the tree of life, and yet God still wants us to repent of that rebellion and come back to enjoy it.

In sin we deserve death, but Jesus came to provide another way. In chapter 1 of Proverbs, we spoke of how “Wisdom” is really a symbol for Jesus. So it is in this verse. Jesus

came and, though He was perfect, He died on the Cross on our behalf. Think of this as when a young man gets in trouble with the law. He doesn't have the money to pay his fine, so his father comes and pays the fine for Him. That's what Jesus did. He paid our price for us.

If we repent and believe in Jesus, we can still find eternal life, even though we don't deserve it. Out of love, God has provided another way to life, since we've already messed up the first way.

And then we see the tree of life again. In Revelation 2, Jesus tells us that those who follow Him will have the right to eat of the tree of life again. And then in Revelation 22 we see it. It sits within a garden in the New Jerusalem, God's perfect city that He will build for us. In paradise it stood in Genesis, until sin took Adam away. In paradise it will stand again, but in that time there will be no more sin, no more death, and no more tears.

If you lay hold of Jesus, you will be given the fruit of the tree of life. Seek Him rather than seeking your own pleasures, for in Him you will find sweetness that you could never find in pride, lust, and anger. Though this whole world stand against you, still will you stand, for you will have life.

Creation by wisdom

“The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens;”

-Proverbs 3:19

I had a friend point this verse out to me a year or so ago, and ever since it has not ceased to stun me. The implications of it make my mind quake with the possibilities.

By wisdom He founded the earth. He measured every curve, every orbit, every weight, and every pull, set this place upon a divinely ordained path, perfectly set for His creation. Every mountain He built, without error, down to every electron that spins within an atom. The weight and makeup of the air He created, flawlessly. It is His hand that guides history, turning everything toward the good for His children. He draws people to Him, even when their entire beings seek rebellion. Each person He knows from the womb and before, and He knows each hair on a man’s head. He provides for the birds and causes the flowers to bloom. All of this in magnificent balance He controls: all for His glory.

I am listening to Wagner as I write this, and I am amazed at how much musical understand it takes to compose a prelude as he did. The understanding of tone, of rhythm, and emotion. Where to swell and where to hold back. How to draw a heart into a piece of music.

This particular prelude is about eight minutes long (from the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, if you are curious). In these eight minutes Wagner has done something that I have not the understanding to do. I have studied music my whole life, and I cannot compose like this. It is wondrous. And yet Wagner merely holds an orchestra together for eight minutes. How much greater still is He who holds all of history together for all of eternity!

I wonder how much wisdom I really bring to my own life. Am I coming to my marriage in wisdom, or in something else? What about my friendships? My job? I can hardly hold my own life together, I fear. How much greater is He who holds together even the cells in my body?

It’s strange how we follow our own wisdom in life, that same wisdom that has so often failed us. It’s strange that my default mode is to fix it myself instead of turning to God. In this, perhaps, I show how little wisdom I truly have.

By wisdom God created all that there is, and by wisdom He created me too. Perhaps the most wondrous thing of all is that He still loves me. He still hears me. He still speaks to me.

He died for me.

This verse is a pun. I’ve been reading it closely for a year, and I only now just got it. We’ve been talking a lot lately about how Wisdom, as depicted in this section of Proverbs, is a symbol for Jesus. So when it says that God founded the world by wisdom, it means that literally, but it also means that God founded the world by Jesus. And that’s exactly what we find is true in

Hebrews 1:2: “but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, *through whom also he created the world.*”

It was through Jesus that the world was created, and it is also Jesus that we can be saved. In my own wisdom, I have ruined nearly everything I’ve touched. I have no right to claim anything from God. And yet He has given me the right to be His adopted son through Jesus. How are we so stubborn as to not make Him to focus of our every breath? How is it we think we know better than Him? Does it not make sense to seek His way in our every turn?

By wisdom God founded the earth. By love He chased me, even into death. By grace He gives me life. By awe, wonder, and love I am brought time after time to Him.

Balance

“by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.”

-Proverbs 3:20

Have you ever wondered at the balance of this world? Have you ever wondered at the comfort of this place? We are perfectly set at a certain distance from the sun so that the temperature is typically nice. Even in summer, though I may complain of the heat, I am still able to go outside and walk around freely with combusting. The rain, in most areas, falls enough to water plants, animals, and people alike, yet not so much to dominate the weather.

The ground is such that it can produce enough food for all. Now certainly not everyone is getting the food, but that's our fault, not the fault of creation. It has long been shown that there is enough food, but only that politics and greed keep it from getting to those who need it.

The world's orbit does not cause it to fall into the sun, nor shoot off into the stars. The moon too is perfectly weighed and set upon its course. The air is mixed expertly, and a recycling system is set in place between us and plants to keep oxygen flowing.

The balance was in place when there were two people on the earth, and it still works just fine with billions. Have you thought of that? Any of us could design a system for two, but to set it in motion and have it still active for billions is astonishing.

Many will say that this balance is a result of evolution, that chance and time caused this world and its inhabitants to grow accustomed to one another. And yet the very foundation of evolution is change, and with change is balance hard to come by. To me, it all seems a little too perfect for it to be the result of chance. The very orbit of the earth, set at exactly this place, the *only* place that could have supported life, is too unlikely for me to credit to anything but planning.

Evolution does not seek balance, but superiority. Survival of the fittest – the best. Its very claims do not lend themselves to such balance. They do not lend themselves to working just as well with two as with billions.

It takes more than chance. It takes wisdom and understanding. It takes the hand of someone greater than us, greater than this place.

The Bible tells us that the world was formed through Jesus, the Son of God. In wisdom He made this place, even you and I. But He did not leave us to ourselves, but guides us through life. In love He came from Heaven to earth to teach us and die for us, taking our place in death which we earned because of our sin. And He rose again and prepares for us a place in heaven.

And one day He will reform this place and make a new Heaven and a new earth. Not as a result of chance, but in careful and loving consideration.

Darwin is interesting, but Darwin won't get you to that place. Only Jesus can. He's worth looking into.

Focus!

“My son, do not lose sight of these – keep sound wisdom and discretion,”

-Proverbs 3:21

When I was newly graduated from college, I was having trouble finding a job. There were a lot of reasons for that. The job market in the Houston area was not great at that time; there were quite a few highly qualified people looking for work. Me on the other hand – not really qualified for much. I also really didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t know where to look, and I was struggling just looking for something I could do.

But the last reason was something very simple: I wasn’t really focusing on it. Not completely. I’d shoot out five or so résumés a day, then I’d move on to other things.

It strikes me that our Christian life can often be like that. We do our prayers in the morning and evening, we read so many chapters of the Bible a day, maybe we have a devotional. But then we’re done (if we even do that much!).

What’s funny is that then we start getting frustrated with how our lives are going. We don’t feel connected with God, and a lot of times we blame Him for it. We walk ourselves right into bad situations and then ask our friends to pray about the outcome.

I do the same thing. There are a hundred things in my day that occupy my time. A lot of them are good things, like a job. Some of them aren’t so great. I sometimes get very frustrated at myself when I lose sight on God.

We’ve all those really foolish moments, haven’t we? Those times where we look back and think, “Wow, that was a really bad decision,” or, “I really spent my time worrying about that?” We spend most of our lives thinking about things and doing things that matter not one bit in the long run. Even a year, a month, a day, or even an hour later, we are disappointed in ourselves for wasting the time.

In my home, I waste so much time on seeking entertainment, on worrying about tomorrow, on trying to make everything perfect when it doesn’t need to be. And at the end of the day, I wonder how much of it has made me grow, or made my family stronger.

When I was looking for my first job, I spent quite a bit of time playing video games or reading silly books. I really don’t remember much of the details of what I was doing. It didn’t matter. What do I do now that won’t matter? Play Free Cell? Get upset with some slight event doesn’t go my way? Watch boring videos online?

Some of the things I do are harmless, but not helpful. Some of them are harmful. In either case, I’m chasing after something I think at the time is important enough, but ultimately it is not.

I am not saying that we should never have fun. Far from it! There is a time for rest, but I'm asking about our focus. I think most of the time we are like Peter, James, and John in the garden, and we keep falling asleep when Jesus has asked us to do something else.

Our focus should ever be on Him, for it is He who can deliver us from our pettiness and pride. We spend our lives running from one idea that will rescue us to another, but it is Jesus who is the way, truth, and life. And yet, we cannot seem to focus on He who can save us.

The foolish and the wise

“and they [sound wisdom and discretion] will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck.”

-Proverbs 3:22

Have you ever known someone who was so smart he made himself into a fool? Let me try to explain with an example. I knew a man who was undoubtedly bright, and he knew he was bright. So much so that his pride precluded him from taking any advice, wisdom, or understanding from anyone else. He usually acted very poorly in the presence of other people because he was just so impressed with himself that he took no notice of those around him.

He’s an extreme case, but we all know people like this. At times, I think we’ve probably all been this guy. I know I have. There have been so many times in my life when I thought I knew best, and so I did not take the advice and counsel of others. On a few of these occasions, I ended up being right. More often, I made a fool of myself.

Wisdom and discretion are not about being smart. They are about knowing what to do with what you know. By definition, they are obvious in your day-to-day dealings.

You can be very smart and act foolishly. Obviously this is true. We are not speaking of the same thing here. It’s like saying someone is blond and has blue eyes. Both can coexist. Being smart is about how much you know. Being foolish is how you act. But you cannot be wise and foolish at the same time. You either act with wisdom or act with foolishness, but not both.

I would probably be considered, in most circles, a smart person. Still, I act foolishly too much. I recognize this in myself, and while I used to strive to be smart, I now strive to be wise.

In the same way, I probably know a little bit about the Bible. I’m happy that I do. But the theology has not changed my life. It is the understanding of God that has changed me.

The difference is important. I can read a biography of a famous person and know *of* him. But his friends actually know *him*. The former may be nice, but the latter is obviously superior.

I can (and did) learn about the Bible, about theology, about interpretations, but it was only when I repented and trusted in Jesus that I could say that I knew Him.

We have seen over and over again in Proverbs how Solomon is using the character of Wisdom as a symbol of Jesus. This is yet another way. I can know about Him, but it is when I put that knowledge to use, when I act wisely, then I begin to know Him.

That decision I wear upon myself like a badge. The change He has made in me is as from night to day. He has taken me from being a basically selfish person to a basically loving one. My understanding of Him must, by very definition, come though in my actions. It is as though I have a little wisdom now, when before I only understood.

The foolishness of our lives without Him is real. We seek to satisfy our lusts, selfishness, greed, ambition, and hateful grudges. We occupy ourselves in things that cannot last. We worry so much about tomorrow, until the day there are no tomorrows left.

But in Him do we seek after something a bit longer lasting and a bit more important. The decisions we make in regard to Jesus last forever. He is the way to life, for only through His Blood can we be saved and forgiven for our foolishness. To deny Him is to choose death. Choose wisely.

By His strength

“Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble.”

-Proverbs 3:23

A couple of times a day, I try to take a walk around my office building, if only to get the juices flowing a little. We have a large parking lot, and there’s a sidewalk that runs around the entire thing, and so I’m usually not walking through grass or anything. However, there is a retention pond behind the parking lot, and yesterday I was beside that pond, watching a rather large snapping turtle in the grass.

As I walked away, I suddenly stepped into a crevice in the ground that had been hidden by the grass. I wasn’t at all hurt, but it was rather surprising.

In my walks, I’m used to much firmer footing. The sidewalks and parking lot are relatively new, and they are smooth and secure. I don’t really have to worry that much about where I step, except to make sure I’m not about to fall off the curb or something. Usually, I don’t really think about it.

Wouldn’t we like that sort of security in life? The sort of firm footing where we don’t need to be looking at the ground in every step to make sure we’re not about to fall?

That’s exactly what Solomon is talking about in this verse. When you are following God, you are on that sort of firm footing. It is He, ultimately, who provides for us and protects us. He guides us in His grace, ever toward Him. We can trust Him.

Trust may not come easily. If I don’t really trust the sidewalk at my office, I’m going to staring at the ground, or maybe I won’t even walk! But that really doesn’t say anything about the sidewalk, but rather about me. The sidewalk is firm whether I trust it or not.

Likewise, God is strong, and He does not fail. Though we may be wary of the path ahead, He will guide us. Though we may worry about our food, clothing, or how long we will live, He holds us fast in His hand (Matthew 6:25-34). Though we may face trials, God is using those trials for our good (Romans 8:28).

And it is not just for this life, which is passing, but for all eternity. It is by the righteousness of Jesus that we have this firm footing, and so too is it by His righteousness that we have life. It is not if we are good enough (we’re not) or if we say the right things to God (we don’t), but by the perfection of Jesus, whose Blood was spilt for us, that we are saved.

To begin following Him, we must repent and believe in Him. He will lead you and forgive you. The path may not look all that wonderful to you. That’s okay. Trust Him for your footing; look up at His glory and follow.

Now I lay me down to sleep . . .

“If you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.”

-Proverbs 3:24

When I was very young, I had a dream once that a painting in my parents’ house attacked me. Now, I had been rather creeped out by this painting for some time, though I cannot say why now. It is of a man sitting in a chair. There’s nothing particularly ominous about it, save only that the eyes seem to follow you wherever you go. Perhaps that was it.

It hardly matters. The end result of this dream is that I slept with the light on for perhaps a month or more. I was afraid to be alone in the night, and I was afraid to sleep.

Even as an adult, there were times when I would fear sleep. Out of loneliness, anxiousness, or whatever, I did not want the next day to come. There have even been a couple of times when I feared because of a bad situation with another person – that perhaps that person would come get me in my sleep. Luckily, I’ve never had a health situation in which I feared not waking up for fear of passing away, and yet we can see that there are many reasons that even an adult would fear sleep.

And then sleep also has another use, and that is the sleep of death, which almost everyone fears. We do not know what tomorrow will bring, but chances are it will bring much as today was. And yet death – too many are without the slightest inkling of what lies beyond that. That is a cause to fear, for it is utterly unknown to those people.

And this is where wisdom comes in. This is where understanding God helps. This understanding tells us some wonderful truths. First of all, the future is known by God. Not only that, but it is under His control. And not only that, but He can and does turn our situations to our good. In love he cares for us, provides for us, and leads us to Himself. What need have we to fear for tomorrow, for He guides even that.

Secondly, my greatest treasures are not here, but in heaven waiting for me. My money and my toys will all fade away. I won’t be able to take one bit of it with me. And yet, those things I can do to care for others, these things I can take. When I help the poor, when I teach of Jesus, when I help a friend with a broken heart – these treasures are eternal. What need have we to fear that our things will be taken, for any real treasure we have cannot be taken by anyone.

Lastly, we may not know exactly what happens after this life, but we know enough. We know there will be judgment of everything we have done wrong.

Now, at first, this may cause me more fear than ever. I haven’t been an evil person compared to others, perhaps, but I’ve done my share. I’ve lied and misled, I’ve lusted and schemed, I’ve sought my own pleasure and greed, I’ve hated and shown improper anger. By God’s standard, which is love, I’ve fallen far short.

So sure, I've been a decent enough guy, but is that good enough to pass the judgment? Inside, I know it's not. I haven't been loving to everyone I've met. For that matter, I haven't been loving to even a portion of them.

But I do not have cause to fear death, because my place in eternity is not based on my own actions. We have all fallen short of God's glory, but in love He sent Jesus to die in our places. In that death He takes the punishment meant for us. His forgiveness is a free gift to those who will repent and believe.

I believe. I believe that Jesus was the Son of God, and that He did die for me. What need have we to fear death, for Jesus has made a place for me in eternal life.

Wisdom shows us these answers very clearly, and so I can sleep well tonight, for God is watching over me.

So much to fear, so little time!

“Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes,”

-Proverbs 3:25

I usually don't watch the news. I will glance through the news stories every day online to keep up, but I just can't take thirty minutes of reporting that says the sky is falling.

Which is usually what it is. There is so much we could fear in this world, and the media latch onto every bit of it to keep us watching. In the last couple of years it has been global warming, swine flu, SARS, recession, depression, the dangers of tap water, war, nuclear bombs, hurricanes, tornados, firestorms, flooding, gangs, drugs, terrorism, banks failing, car manufacturers failing, businesses failing, identity theft, healthcare issues, poverty, the housing crisis, climate change (which used to be global warming until they figured out that the temperature was going *down* rather than *up*), and so much more.

It has become common, at least where I live, to see someone walking around with a medical mask over his face to protect him from whatever germs or viruses may be around. People are panicking that they won't be employed next week.

You know what? On one level it's all legitimate. Almost everything on my list above is a legitimate concern. It may be a small concern, a big concern, or just hype, but most of it is worth at least a little thought.

And worrying about it doesn't make one bit of difference.

Because on the other hand, none of our fear over this stuff is legitimate. It's not legitimate because there is God, and “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

When I was young, Hurricane Alisha came through Houston, but though I was young, I did not fear. I wasn't afraid because I was with my father, and I knew he would protect me. As far as I recall, the only time I was really afraid during the whole thing was when my father went outside in the store to do something in the yard (I do not remember what). My parents may correct my memory on this, but I distinctly remember feeling safe with him.

So it is with our Father in Heaven. The only difference is, God never leaves to go do something in the yard. He is always here, always with me, and He has far more power than my dad.

If we just look at our situations, there are plenty of reasons to fear. But in faith we look to Him who controls all things, and we can believe that He will guide us through safely to Himself. Not even death can separate us from Him.

That is not to say the sudden terror won't come. They will. But it is not they that control our fate. Our lives are in the hands of Jesus, who died as a ransom for us.

And this glorious promise is only for those who do have faith. If you have not repented and believed in Jesus as the Son of God who died for our sins, then the sudden terrors may be reason to fear. Trust Him instead, and He will guide you.

Will we mourn?

“Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes,”

-Proverbs 3:25

There is a fear, I must confess, that lingers in my heart. It is a fear for those I love who do not know Jesus. I have wondered on this quite a lot, and have prayed on it as much.

I fear sometimes because the ruin of the wicked will come. Judgment Day will come, when Jesus judges the righteous and unrighteous and separates us for eternity. For there is a heaven, and those who believe in Him will go there. And there is a hell, and those who refuse to repent will go there.

It's a very difficult topic to address, and not one I do lightly. The thought of those I love being eternally damned does not sit well with me.

A lot of people cannot reconcile the existence of Hell with a loving God. How could He send people there if He is loving? Well, that's not really what's happening. All people have a chance to turn away from their own sin and bow a knee to the One who truly deserves worship. All people have that chance, but many refuse and turn away. As C. S. Lewis so wonderfully put it, either a man will say to God, “Your will be done,” or God will say to the man, “*Your* will be done.” If the man will not accept God, then he does so to his own destruction. It is he who separates himself from God, not the other way around.

Those people I love who have rejected God have done so of their own will. They decided that sex or money or power was better than God, and so they made their choice. I pray that they change their minds, and I will try to help them with that, but it is not my choice to make. I went one way, and they another.

But I fear that day when it's too late for them to change. I fear the day of their judgment. I should not be afraid.

I should not be afraid because God is still in control, and God can orchestrate the entire universe to His own ends. He is the one who can tell the end from the beginning and guides the course of history to His glory. There is no evil in Him, no sin. Whatever He ordains is ordained for the good.

I may not be able to see it now, but I will. I hope for that day, when the plan is laid before me and I see His glory in every moment of history. I long for that day.

And in that day, it will make sense. It will all fall into place. It will fall together perfectly, to the degree that I will not be able to have the slightest doubt as to His love and mercy. On that day I will respond, “It was best this way. Praise God!”

I don't know how. It's not for me to know how. It's for me to trust Him. When His Son, Jesus, was judged and placed upon a Cross to die, the world could not know what good God had

planned for that moment. And yet it was the greatest good of them all, for in His Blood we can be saved.

I still pray that those loved ones repent and trust in Jesus. Maybe they will. I can only place that into His hands. He gives people the chance. Perhaps He is giving you the chance right now. Don't waste it.

One step forward, two steps back

“for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.”

-Proverbs 3:26

We spend so much time in our lives trying to fix things that we messed up. We spend so much time looking back and trying to figure out what went wrong. From the very simple to the complex, we are always trying to put out metaphorical fires and retrace steps.

There’s not an important relationship in my life that I haven’t had to mend at some point or another. And the cracks in those relationships are usually over something pretty silly. I cannot tell you how many minor misunderstandings with my wife have turned into arguments. I can’t tell you how many times this is happened in the last *month*.

A much more minor example would be this very paragraph. I began it one way and then decided against it, so I tried to figure out where the sentence went wrong and ended up deleting it completely. Before I publish it, I will read it over again and probably fix something else. (I did.)

Almost every election we have is about someone wanting to fix the problems another guy caused. Politics is ultimately the art of trying to fix something we messed up ages ago.

Every day it seems I mess up with something, someone, or somehow. I am constantly going back to repair something I did.

How is it we can walk through this world with any sort of confidence at all? How can we walk with our head so high when we have so often tripped and fallen in the past? For many people, it is pride. I remember not too long ago when I was just consumed with pride. (I still struggle with pride daily, but a few years ago it was quite a bit worse than it is now.) I wonder now what caused me to be so proud, because I certainly hadn’t earned it in any way. Like most others, I was messing everything up all the time.

But it is pride, I think, that drives so many. They think that they have the answers, and that people need to listen to them. How strange. I know myself, and I, above all others, should know that there is no reason for me to be proud. I know how often I make mistakes, how often I ruin things for myself and others. And you know what? I still sometimes think I know the answers, when I should know that I don’t.

This promise of God is very special to me, and it’s for this very reason. I know that I’m not worth my own trust. And yet God, who is perfect in every way, has come beside me and told me, “Put your arm around Me; I’ll keep you from falling.”

As David said in that wonderful psalm: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

When Jesus came to earth, He showed us how to walk. He led the way for us, teaching us without a single misstep and without faltering. He bade us come after Him, telling us that He is “the way, and the truth, and the life.”

In His death, He followed us to death itself to insure that our stumbles would not cause us to be forever lost. He carried us back and set us upon His path again. He sent His Spirit to us as a guide, to teach us the way, to help us in every moment.

In Christ I can have confidence. I cannot have such confidence in myself, for I have tripped far too often. But in Him I know my feet are firmly planted. It is only when I get distracted and wander off from Him that I fall again. And yet He always comes for me, every time.

If you don't know this sort of firm footing, you need to turn away from your own flawed efforts to stand and trust in Him. Repent of those old ways and believe in Jesus. You can have confidence in what He offers, for it is only through Him that we will find eternal life.

Doing good

“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.”

-Proverbs 3:27

This verse really got me thinking. I wonder if I can say that I really do this. I try to be helpful and considerate at work or at home, but am I withholding good at times?

In fact, I can name a hundred times when I do. There have been many times when I've been caught up at work, and I use my extra time to get a little ahead rather than help someone else catch up. At home, I jump into an argument with fury rather than pulling back, though my wife certainly is due some mercy (she has to live with me, after all).

There are been organizations and people whom I could have supported financially, only I didn't, even though they were worthy causes. There have been times when I didn't help someone with a project because I already had my evening planned.

There have been countless times when I didn't speak to someone about Jesus, though it was in my power. I withheld from them the greatest good of all.

This verse asks us to do something that should be obvious, and yet to actually follow it would be revolutionary. If we spent our time and money, when we were able, to help those people who could use it, how long before we transformed our communities?

And this is only for those who are worthy of it. Paul takes it a step further, saying, “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Romans 12:17-19).

“So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” No one is going to pretend that it is always in our power to make the world perfect. But how often do we return evil with evil? If someone at work slights me, do I seek some kind of revenge? If my wife gets angry at me, do I get angry back? Do I hold grudges? Do I rejoice when someone else falls?

God never returns evil for evil. Even though we have all gone our own ways, rejected Him and denied Him, He still seeks us. He sent His only Son to die for us, and even while we were placing Him upon the Cross to kill Him, He was praying for us, that we would be forgiven.

Jesus has the great good of life, and He offers it freely. He bids us to come and repent and believe, and in doing so live forever. He does not hold back, nor ask for something in return.

We have received that mercy, and it should inspire us to be merciful to others. So if someone at work gets me in trouble, I pray for the faith to forgive that person, because I've been forgiven of much greater wrongs. Those who refuse to repent and follow Jesus will be judged by

Him. We don't have to work of vengeance ourselves. Instead, let us pray for mercy. Let us pray for the change to do good for others. If we actually did it, it could change everything.

Doing good when you can do it

“Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it’ – when you have it with you.”

-Proverbs 3:28

Not long ago, we had a terrible flood in the Houston area, and the parking lot in my apartment complex was filled with water. Almost every car parked there was a little flooded. It wasn't bad, but everyone's floorboards were pretty well soaked.

A lot of people helped one another out. A lot of people didn't. Obviously, there was a difference in the results. For those who came together, pooled their resources, and helped one another out, they went to bed that night very, very tired, but with dry cars. The others didn't seem to fare as well.

It seemed like a rather obvious solution. One person had a wet-dry vac, another an extension cord, another something else. Together, it worked out. It wouldn't have worked out if everyone had said, “Eh! We'll worry about it tomorrow.”

In certain times, the situation makes it clear that we need to help out *now*. On that day, we needed to work right away. It was obvious. Normally, it is not so clear.

My wife and I recently found some charities to support, but even though we had decided to help, I didn't actually send the money for some time. I finally did. I don't know if the delay made any difference at all, but I can imagine ways it could have. It certainly didn't help, waiting so long.

When we wait for tomorrow to help, we often find that tomorrows never come. We end up not helping at all, or not helping quickly enough. We all have big dreams of what we will do to help the world, but we just need a little more time, be a little more financially secure.

But that's not love. Love sacrifices when a sacrifice is needed. Love gives up its last dollar for a friend, even when the chips in the vending machine looked pretty good. Love gives more than it can afford, and then tightens its belt a little to make up the difference.

Love does this because it thinks of others before itself. It puts the needs of others before its own desires.

We are able to love like this because we have a God who watches over us, who provides for us, who loves us so much more than we ever deserved. In love He sent His Son to us, to die in our place, and to rise again to lead us into life.

Frankly, I do not deserve that sort of love. I do not deserve His sacrifice. So why should it be difficult for me to sacrifice for others. Not tomorrow, but now, when it is needed.

Don't do evil

“Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you.”

-Proverbs 3:29

For a few months while in college, I had a particular neighbor in the apartment right above me. Every Saturday and Sunday mornings, starting at about 7:00 or 8:00, he would start playing country music really loudly. I doubt that would be a problem for me today, since I am an early riser, but at the time, I was working on Friday and Saturday nights until after midnight. In addition, I absolutely loath modern country music, so this was sort of adding insult to injury.

As annoying as that was, it's not really what this verse is talking about. Perhaps, when I was wakened so early by the noise, I would have considered this a grievous evil. And indeed, we should be considerate of our neighbors, but Solomon is thinking a little bigger here.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day made the mistake of interpreting the word “neighbor” here to only mean those who live next to you or those whom you like. That's not what it means. Your neighbor is, yes, those who live next to you and your friends, but it is also the people in your town, your countrymen, and even those in neighboring countries. They are the people you encounter online, those you see on the television, and those on the other side of the world who need your help. In short, everyone you encounter is your neighbor.

We don't often plan evil for our friends, but what about our customers? Do we intentionally misrepresent ourselves to people for money? In politics, do we vote for those people who promise to shift problems to another county or state? For example, do we vote to have power plants built in another town but oppose them going up nearby? Do we vote to increase the taxes on people of another tax bracket than we are in, like when we of the middle class vote to increase taxes on the wealthy? How quick are we to sue someone if there is a chance to get a little money? What about suing a company? That is easier still, since we sort of view companies as inhuman entities, not realizing that court judgments against them will result in stockholders losing sometimes much needed money and employees losing jobs. There are so many situations where we will use what power we have to take advantage of another person.

This becomes a lot easier as our cities grow bigger. I live in a city where I can pass someone on the street and never see that person again, simply because this city is so large. I wouldn't know if he were a visitor to the city of had lived here all of his life. It's so easy to take advantage of someone you will never see again.

This is one of the most wonderful things about Jesus – that He did not plan evil against us. He was mocked, challenged, beaten, betrayed, and crucified, and yet He still prayed for us to be forgiven. Surely we deserve evil against us; our lives are filled with selfishness, pride, hatred,

lust, greed, and irreverence toward God, but still Jesus died to provide for us a way to return to the Father. If we repent and believe in Him, we will be saved.

We may not take that way. We may reject Him and go our own way. But if we do that, it is on us, not Him. He has given us chance after chance to come to life. He does not plan evil against us, but instead provides the way to good.

Don't do evil over nothing

“Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm.”

-Proverbs 3:30

My first reaction when reading this verse was this – what in the world am I going to talk about here? Am I going to try to encourage people to not get into battles when there is nothing to fight over? Do we really do that? Surely we don't really wage wars over nothing, do we?

Then I thought about it, and my second reaction was this – how in the world am I going to write about all the wars we wage over nothing?

I know we always *think* we have a good reason to get angry at one another, to really go at it, to argue and battle. At the time, these reasons seem really, really important.

But what are our fights usually about? When we get close to elections, we'll start massive arguments and debates over two people who usually agree on almost every issue. At work we instantly dislike those who may get in the way of a promotion, even though we are working at the same place for the same goal. At home we get angry at the kids for leaving a toy out on the floor.

In the Church, we seem constantly angry at other Christians over something. We will mock those who would agree with us on every single point except maybe baptism or the rapture (it amazes me how dogmatic people are on the rapture, by the way, considering prophecy has a way of tripping even the most humble student of the Word up). Some churches will not allow those who have a slightly different view of communion from partaking of the table, even if that person agrees with every single critical point of the Christian faith. And then some whole churches will focus their wrath against sinners of some sort, either homosexuals, drunks, or fornicators.

Some denominations have even been birthed out of frustration because of this struggle. They falsely believe that it is doctrine that is the problem, since we always fight over doctrine, so they toss doctrine out the window. And then what do they do? They mock churches that hold onto the Word, proving that it wasn't the doctrine that was the problem at all, but us.

Every day, we hold our own private grudge matches against people who don't use their blinkers, who live in sin, who didn't agree with us at the last meeting, who sings too loudly at church (and off key at that!), or who talks in the theater.

And most of the time, these people have done very little, if any, harm. And even if they had, love would have solved the problem when hatred only makes things worse.

We fall so naturally and easily into cliques, into factions. Even with Christians, our default mode seems to be to run to the like-minded and shut out the rest of the world. But that is not what we have been called to do. We have been called to love.

If Jesus judged us with half the ferocity that we judge each other, we would all end up in damnation. He would be right to do it, because it's exactly what we deserve. Thankfully, He does not. If we repent and believe in Him, then we are not judged by our many, many sins, but by Grace.

Consider that next time you judge another for some small issue. How would you fare under the same degree of judgment. Let us treat each other with mercy, as He has treated us.

Don't envy evil

“Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways,”

-Proverbs 3:31

I was getting my lunch together today to eat and then write this very entry when I happened upon some celebrity gossip magazines in the office lunchroom. The covers promised juicy gossip about the most faddish stars. What draws us to these magazines? Gossip? Of course. Envy? Yes. Godliness? Obviously not. We want to be like these people, always on TV and living in enormous homes.

It's not just Hollywood. We regard almost anyone wealthy in this way. We either want to know how they did it (so we can do it too) or tear them down out of jealousy. My home state, as do many, has a lottery, where the state makes tons of money every year off people who are trying to get it all without working for it. We want to be rich. We want to be successful.

This is not a verse against success. The Bible is not opposed to success or being wealthy. It's about what we're willing to do to get there.

This verse tells us not to envy violent men. “Violent men” is the literal translation, but the connotation gives us something a little more board. It's talking about those who murder and hurt to get their way, those who cheat and steal. Those who are successful by pulling others down.

We know about people like this, right? We hear about the CEOs who get rich off the backs of their employees. We hear about those who take lavish vacations while at the same time firing people “to save money.” We hear about those who stab others in the back just to get ahead. We hear of those who manipulate others just to make a buck.

Do we envy them? How far would you go to be like one of those celebrities? Who would you step on to get there? Who would you hurt? What price would you pay?

You may scoff at the question. I wonder if you tried to make a coworker look bad last year so you would get the promotion instead of him. I wonder if you cheated on your taxes, making another pay your share, to save a little. Did you try to squeeze every penny out of a business deal? How much do you neglect your family in order to stay late at work?

When Jesus was tempted in the desert, he was offered the world if He would just bow a knee to Satan. Just like that, He could have had it all. Instead, He chose homelessness, ridicule, and finally death. He did it because there are things that are more important than fame and money. There is love. And that's why He died – for love.

We have all fallen into those moments of greed and envy, but on the Cross Jesus paid the price for the sins we have committed. Instead of taking all He the wealth He could from this world, He instead asked for the sin and death we should have paid. In repentance and faith in

Him, we can be free from our envy and greed. Instead of seeking after those things, we can find life.

Don't be devious

“for the devious person is an abomination to the LORD, but the upright are in his confidence.”

-Proverbs 3:32

I really don't like the modern theory of customer service, which is really only this: The squeaky wheel gets the grease. The concept is this – those who complain loudly enough will get their way. If you don't like what the person in front of you is saying, ask for a manager. Work your way up. Most of the time, you'll get what you want.

Ironically, the best customers will almost never ask for a deal. They'll come quietly and respectfully and take what is given. Those are the customers who really deserve the lower prices or special deals. Some businesses still operate this way, but too few of them.

I worked in a bookstore once, and one lady complained that a book was scratched up and she deserved a discount. Honestly, I don't recall there being a mark on that book at all, but she insisted that we call a manager. The line behind her was growing as she argued with the manager. Later, when I spoke with her again, she told me that she would make such complaints regularly. She would find something wrong everywhere she went and would demand a discount no matter where she was.

It worked for her, but while the manager was arguing with her, I was looking at the people who were waiting in line, wondering if any of them would get such deals. I had a few customers I thought deserved them, since they were so loyal and kind, but we never made those offers.

Sadly, in this world, it is often the devious who win. It is often those who will make demands over everything, as though they deserved one bit of it.

There are so many who are willing to step on anyone to get a dollar (and sometimes only that!). And I wonder how many I've willingly stepped on in my own life. I can think of a few.

The momentary reward will fade. That dollar will be gone eventually, probably very quickly. Even if you keep doing it, keep taking, taking, taking, it will not last beyond the grave. But you will. I don't care about your portfolio – how do *you* look?

All our tricks and betrayals over money may just work in this life, but they do not work with God. He sees through every motive, every word. It is our heart He judges, and no amount of complaining or threatening to call His manager is going to help you.

Jesus acted rightly in every circumstance. In every way He was upright. He never manipulated others for His own gain. He never manipulated the system to achieve His desires. He walked in honesty and integrity, and it so offended those around Him that they killed Him. He did not yell and curse for His way. Instead, He came in love. For us.

And now, Jesus sits at the right hand of God. He will return in glory, and every knee will bow before Him. It was not His bank account that brought Him this far, and our own bank accounts will not ingratiate us with Him. It will be our hearts.

Who is cursed; who is blessed?

“The LORD’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous.”

-Proverbs 3:33

I think we wish this verse were more true. Or let me put it this way – I think that we believe this is less true than we would like. We so often see evil people prosper and wish something would happen to make them suffer.

So often we have heard God’s justice questioned – “What kind of God would allow this to happen?” some will ask. “Why would God allow me to suffer?” Indeed, for a time at least, it does seem that “his sun rise[s] on the evil and on the good, and [he] sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45).

I wonder what we would say if we saw as God sees. I wonder if we would make the same claims if we understood as He does. We howl at the pain in our lives, little thinking of the greater vision of what is happening. A dog who is undergoing surgery does not realize the surgery will save his life; he only knows the pain of the moment. Are we like that? Without the fullness of time to show us the meaning of it all, do we wonder about justice for the moment?

In this moment, I may compare myself to someone I saw on television, and I will think, “I am a good person.” But God sees my life as a whole and holds it against His perfect standard. He sees my pride, lust, arrogance, hatred, anger, and greed. He sees all of that. If it were laid before on a table, surely I would cry out like Isaiah did when he saw Jesus, realizing immediately that I deserve death.

He can see the dark currents that my sin has set off in my life. He can see the sadness and regret that has clouded my heart. He can see the loneliness caused when my sin drove others away. You may only see the car I drive, the home I have, my job, and my wife, but He sees more.

He can see how these sins have tainted everything.

And He can see the end, when all will be judged for their own actions and motives. If a murderer is arrested, do we complain that he has not received his punishment before the trial even starts? No, of course not. We wait until the trial is done, and then judge the justice of the sentence and how it is carried out. In the same way, our trial has not yet been, and justice is coming swiftly. It may not be here yet, but the wicked will find their just end.

God sees that too, and so He sees the justice that will come. It is a justice that I may fear, for I know my own heart, except for Jesus.

It is true – we all deserve death, but it is the righteousness of Christ that brings the ultimately blessing. For those who repent and believe in Him, we will find the blessing that

comes with His righteousness, not our own. We will find life. In love He gave us the gift of His Blood, and that Blood can pay for our sins.

The blessings I gain all come from Him. In the best ways my wife and I are one are because we are one around Him. We have been blessed already by His forgiveness, and we will find blessings still to come.

I need to get through that door!

“Toward the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.”

-Proverbs 3:34

It's one of my pet peeves – those people who try to bully their way into everything. If there's anything they want, anything they want to be a part of, they will shove and push and complain until they get it.

Half the time, they succeed, but everyone gets annoyed when they do. Everyone sees the injustice of it, and it just grates on you.

It's so much different when someone comes in humility – those people who respectfully ask, who go through the right processes. In the long run, I think this may get better results when you're dealing with the same people every day. If you're trying to get a discount at a store, bullying will be your best shot, but when you're at work, at church, or at home, the situation is different. A kind word does wonders with people, while such pride turns people off. I have a tendency to resist people when they try to put me on the defensive. But if you come kindly and respectfully, that will go a long way with me. And when I go to others in that same way, I tend to fare a little better.

But that's not our first instinct, is it? Our first instinct is to demand our rights. There is something about the human heart that just *needs* to get through that closed door. It may be an exclusive club, a special deal, getting out of a speeding ticket, or a beautiful girlfriend that should be way out of your league. If there is a door that seems closed, it is out nature to try to bust it down.

So many of our arguments and feuds are based on pride alone. I am so convinced I am right that I am willing to destroy a relationship rather than accept otherwise. That is that closed door in that moment – being justified as right – and we will knock down anyone who stands in our way.

Meanwhile, you get someone humble enough to not care whether he is right or not, and you'll have a hard time having an argument. You get someone who is trying to work out of love, and the relationship will probably remain strong.

We can't stand those people who always act out of pride, and yet we are the exact same way. We're that way with our friends, our family, our coworkers, the businesses we frequent, and our spouses. We're like that with God.

We're probably like that with God most of all. You ask people on the street if they are going to Heaven, they'll tell you a resounding Yes, even if they can't really explain why they are so sure of it. Keep talking to them – you'll find out they want the Final Judgment to be on their terms, not God's. They'll say, “I'm a good person,” without a single mention of what God may

consider to be good. “God will let me in,” they say in the same way they say, “That club will let me in.”

In truth, it is pride that got Satan kicked out of Heaven. Why do we think we will fare better with it? Why do we think God will let us into Heaven because *we* say He will? We scoff at His expectations, at His Word, and His Son. We rely, instead, on ourselves.

In the New Testament, this passage is quoted as “God opposes the proud.” That’s not so hard to understand. We all oppose the proud. We just don’t think of ourselves as “the proud.” But we are. We scoff at God and instead tell Him what He needs to do with us.

Jesus told of two men who went to the Temple to pray. The first thanked God that he wasn’t like all of these sinners around him. The second begged for mercy. Mercy was granted to the second, but not to the proud first man. Which one are you?

Jesus too came in humility, even to a death upon a Cross. In that humble death, He has provided us a way to forgiveness. In our pride God opposes us, but Jesus took our place in punishment, so now we can come in humility and be saved. Without Him there is no way. If we repent and believe, we will find His favor.

What will you inherit?

“The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.”

-Proverbs 3:35

Today I’ve been thinking a little about what the world puts up as wisdom. And, honestly, the line of thoughts on this subject makes me very sad. I see people in the grocery store looking at the magazines, trying to find the sage advice that will fix their lives. I see people flocking to Oprah and Dr. Phil, hoping they will say something that will mend the mistakes. We turn to politicians, the great wise leaders of this age, for ideas to fix the problems other politicians created. And then we reelect those politicians when they only make things worse. We ask celebrities their opinions on everything, hoping some manner of wisdom will be gleaned. We turn to horoscopes and fortune cookies. We all bought into the great lie that we need to live for our own pleasure, our own greed, and then we desperately search for wisdom to fill us up when money and sex do not.

Those who come forward as “the wise” very rarely are. They spout axioms and encourage more greed and selfishness. Concentrate on yourselves, they say. Somehow, a change in job or spouse will solve everything.

In religion, the great thinkers tell us everyone is okay, that surely we’re just fine in God’s eyes, which may be the silliest statement of them all. And yet when someone points out that we’re not okay, and that we probably should start looking to God and living for Him, he is mocked as intolerant and narrow-minded.

Scientists are absolutely sure there is no God. Which is quite a bold statement, considering that we’ve only experienced a short sliver of time compared to the history of the universe, and that we’ve only seen a tiny slice of earth, which is a tiny slice of the Solar System, which is a tiny slice of the galaxy. Quite a bold statement to say that we can know for a fact that there is no God when we are not omniscient to know that for sure. (And if we were, we would be God.)

Wisdom in God’s eyes is not like wisdom in the world’s eyes. They can sometimes be as different as night and day, which is why Paul wrote of others, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:22). Sometimes, the most amazing statements the world can offer (such as, “There is no God”) collapse under the weight of God’s understanding.

Is it wise to ignore the counsel of the truly wise? Obviously, it is not. So when the author of wisdom, God Himself, speaks to us, the wise will be silent and listen. That’s another part of wisdom the world does not understand – silence. The wise of the world tend to speak much more than listen.

The spiritually wise seek the ways of God, for those ways are unfailing, straight, and true. They lead to life.

It is Jesus who shows us this way. He is “the way, the truth, and the life.” Who that is wise does not seek these things? Who does not want the way? Who that is wise does not seek truth? What about life?

The spiritually wise seek Christ. When I was lost, I thought myself wise. I thought so highly of myself. But it was when I submitted in humility to Him who is truth that I learned how foolish I had actually been.

When I follow Him, I am astounded at what I learn. When I repent when He tells me I should, I always find that He was right all along. When I obey, I find life in every step, and I will for eternity.

The wise will seek for themselves to see if these claims are true. Only the foolish will dismiss them. The fools may have the world for a time, but that is all they will inherit. The wise will inherit life.