

Give Me an Undivided Heart

Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. -Psalm 86:11

When it comes down to it, what we need more than anything else to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord is an undivided heart—which is undivided affection, undivided loyalty, and undivided devotion. It says in 2 Chronicles 16:9, *The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.*

David's prayer is, "Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name." Those who have a single-hearted devotion to the Lord will not only learn to fear his name, but they will fulfill the greatest commandment in the Law, as well as the greatest commandment in the Decalogue, namely, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart...* (Dt 6:5) and, *You shall have no other gods before me* (Ex 20:3). Disobedience and idolatry spring from a heart with divided loyalties. That is why we are told, *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life* (Pr 4:23).

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It is impossible to serve two different masters at the same time. It is not ok with the Lord that your heart is drawn to other "gods" any more than it would be ok with your spouse that you give part of your heart to some other lover. The Lord is a jealous God—and rightly so because he made us for himself. Double-mindedness and love of the world divide our hearts and bring a wedge between ourselves and our God.

In this prayer, David is literally asking God to "unite" his heart. He is asking the Lord to bring every part of his heart into harmony with that part which is wholly devoted to God. He is asking the Lord to do something that you might think would be David's responsibility. Apart from David's desire and consent, it will not be done, but the truth is that the heart can be deceitful and sometimes we don't even know what is in there (see Jeremiah 17:9). That's why we need the empowering grace of God to bring us to that state of wholehearted devotion.

If we are serious about praying this prayer, the Lord will be serious about answering it. But know that it can be a painful process to gain this undivided heart. Still, an undivided heart is healed heart. An undivided heart is a fervent heart. An undivided heart is a trustworthy heart. It is a heart that fears the name of the Lord and does his will. It is the heart with which the Lord is most pleased.

You Established Your Faithfulness in Heaven Itself

I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself. - Psalm 89:1-2

It is one thing for a matter to be established on the earth. It is another for it to be established in heaven. Those things which are established on earth apart from the authority of heaven, are transient. But those things which are established in heaven will never change or pass away. If something is established in heaven you can count on it more than your next breath.

Psalm 89:2 declares that the faithfulness of God is established in heaven itself. Heaven is the seat of all authority. *The Lord has established his*

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throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all, Psalm 103:19 declares. There is no higher court than the court of heaven. There is no more eminent legislature than the hall of heaven. All authority is derived from this place. Whatever is established here supercedes whatever is established anywhere else.

The faithfulness of the Lord can never be questioned, doubted or disputed. It has been established in all truth and for all time because it has been established in heaven itself. And because it is established in heaven, it cannot, and will not, be altered. If the Lord had established his faithfulness only on the earth, it would be good but it would have only been temporary. But his dwelling place lasts forever and so does the faithfulness he established there.

Whatever then is established in heaven must of means then be established on the earth. Jesus purchased our salvation by his death on the cross here on the earth but he established it when *he entered heaven itself... to appear for us in God's presence* (He 9:24). It is there in heaven that our names are recorded in the Lamb's book of life (see Luke 10:20; Hebrews 12:23; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5)—and if our names are written in heaven, our salvation is assured.

Because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, when he gave his disciples the keys to the kingdom of heaven he gave us the authority to establish things in heaven. Those things on earth that we declare bound or loosed by the authority of Christ will be established in the courts of Almighty God (see Matthew 16:19). Let us pray and make sure that everything that we do in ministry and life flow from that place from which the Lord established his faithfulness—heaven itself.

A Thousand Years in Your Sight Are like a Day

You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men." For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. -Psalm 90:3-4

Of all the attributes of God, the one most difficult for me to understand is “eternalness.” Not that the Lord’s omnipotence or his omnipresence is entirely comprehensible, but I have no frame of reference for anything with no beginning. Somehow I can imagine a God who can do anything, is everywhere, knows everything and even who has no end. But as far as comprehending how it is that God has always been, well...such knowledge is too wonderful for me.

Time is a fascinating entity. Most of us see time as linear and constant. Einstein showed that time can be relative. And what is time to the God who has no beginning and no end?

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Before there was an Einstein or a Hawking, there was a Moses. Before there were modern theories regarding space-time continuum, there was Psalm 90, where Moses said to the Lord, “*For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.*” When the Holy Spirit reveals to Moses that a thousand years in the sight of God are like a day, at the very least he is saying that God does not see time the way we do. The different measures of our time are all the same to him. But so many of us still see Moses’ statement in linear terms. We say, “Well that must mean that to God, a thousand years equals one day.” Gag! That misses the point. If you take that approach, what then do you make of the rest of the verse which says a thousand years is like a *watch in the night* (a “watch” equals three hours)?

Numbers have very significant meanings in the Scripture. The number “one thousand” is used most often to denote infiniteness. When Psalm 50:10 says that the Lord owns the cattle on a thousand hills, does one thousand mean literally one thousand? No, one thousand denotes an unlimited number (you might want to rethink the idea of a literal “thousand” year reign of Christ on the earth). 2 Peter 3:8 echos Psalm 90: *With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.*

We serve an infinite, eternal God whose ways are so much higher than ours. Even though God created time for us and works perfectly within it for our benefit, with the eternal God, there is no time. One of our days is no different than a million years to him because our God encompasses all time and space.

I think Einstein was on to something.

Today, If You Hear His Voice, Do Not Harden Your Hearts

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways." So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest." -Psalm 95:7-11

To harden your heart at the voice of the Lord is as noxious a thing that you can do in life-leading only to harm and ruin. Because the word of the Lord is so vital and valuable to the prosperity of the soul, to harden your heart against it is suicide. How would you expect the Lord to respond to you if you harden your heart when he speaks?

The psalmist is recounting the episode when the children of Israel were murmuring against Moses in the desert. There was no

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sign of water and they had no faith that the Lord would provide them with anything to drink (see Exodus 17). They “quarreled,” and they “tested” the Lord there. That is why Moses named that place “Meribah” and “Massah.” Even though they had seen the hand of the Lord and heard his voice, they *hardened their hearts*, and the Lord was not pleased.

What does it mean to harden your heart? Well, pretty much what you think. We all know the difference between the person who has a “hard” heart and one who has a “soft” one. You can’t get through to a hard hearted person. They will not listen to you no matter how you try to reach them. They have decided to not receive what you have to offer, and that’s the end of it.

The word of the Lord is meant to be invigorating and life giving. It is *living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword* (He 4:12)—but not to the heart that has been hardened through rebellion, bitterness and unbelief. You should welcome the word of the Lord, even when it is a word of discipline. Don’t you want to hear his voice? The “entrance” of his word gives light and understanding (see Psalm 119:130 KJV), and the Lord delights to speak to those who are eager to hear from him.

There is one of two things that you can do when you hear God’s voice. You can soften your heart to receive it and benefit from what he is saying, or you can harden your heart and reject it. Don’t choose the latter. It will only lead to ruin. If the Lord cares enough to speak to you, do not put him to the “test.” The price that you will have to pay will be too high and there may be no remedy for the consequence.

As Far as the East Is from the West

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. -Psalm 103:12

Sin is more than a problem. It is the problem. Every disease, every heartache, every torment and every death are a result of sin. It was sin that cursed the world, changing it from a perfect paradise to a mixed bag of good and evil. It is sin that gave the devil authority to wreak havoc among the sons of men. And it is sin that separates a person from God and sends her or him to hell.

To say that the most important thing that could be done for this world would be to deal with the sin problem would be like saying the most important thing you could do for a drowning man would be to pull him out of the water. The removal of transgression would, a thousand times over, be the greatest single gift that could ever possibly be offered to a resident of this doomed planet.

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For the Son of God to leave heaven and fully embrace life as a man in the confines of our sin-sick world was the most heroic act in the history of the universe. He came to seek and to save those who were lost, afflicted, bereaved and destined for eternal destruction. And the way that he was able to deal with all our problems was through dealing with the problem. He removed our transgressions. 1 John 3:5 says, *You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins.* And take them away he did. *“As far as the east is from the west,”* David says, *“he has removed our transgressions from us.”*

How far is the east from the west? I don't know, but I know that I love the sound of that phrase. Through faith in Jesus, my sins are gone, never to be found or seen again. They have been removed. Because the Father loves us so much, he has determined that the curse that separated us from his love would be removed as far as it can be removed. His heart is to *tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea* (Mic 7:19).

Maybe we need to meditate a little more on the dire straights of being lost and without hope in a world condemned by sin and the titanic achievement that took place at Calvary when Jesus died on the cross to take away our sin. Cherishing the reality that our transgressions have been removed from us as far as the east is from the west will only serve to give us eyes to see and a heart to understand what Jesus has truly done for us and the problem that people have without him.

Who Constantly Do What Is Right

Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right. -Psalm 106:3

When I was in my early twenties, I took a serious run at playing club tennis. I had all the tools: Great serve, quickness, good hand-eye coordination, not to mention height. I played some exciting matches against some very good players. But the main thing that I lacked was consistency. An impressive serve and volley followed by two unforced errors will not win you many matches. You have to play consistently well in order to win at tennis.

It may be said with some force of reason that the most important factor for a victorious Christian life is consistency. The word of God says, *Blessed are they... who constantly do what is right.* A victorious life is not marked by a lot of falling down. There was a popular “Christian” song recently that irritated me so much I would turn the radio off whenever I heard it being played. It described the Christian experience this way: “We fall down and get up, fall down and get up...” Not that there is a lack of grace from the Lord if we fall, but this fatalistic portrayal of moribund Christians hobbling through life neither builds me up in my most holy faith nor honors the great salvation which we have received.

***I cannot afford to have
frequent moral detours***

It is the will of the Lord that we walk with Jesus consistently—that we are unremitting in doing what is right and that we don't stumble. I have learned that momentum is very important to my Christian life and ministry. I cannot afford to have frequent moral detours. The runner needs every step to be sure in order to win the race. The alcoholic can be set back years with just one drink. Momentum can be hard to regain when we allow ourselves to be waylaid as we press on toward the high calling in Jesus. Most Christians don't come close to becoming who they were called to be in Christ because inconsistency has robbed them of the momentum that is needed to get there.

Blessed is *he that doeth righteousness at all times* the King James Version of the English Bible says. At all times. Constantly. Without this consistency we find ourselves slipping back and having to cover much of the same territory over and over again. Our confidence before the Lord is weakened and the blessing of heaven is retarded when we experience the reproach of failing to do what is right.

It is not our gifting or even our calling that will bring us to that place the Lord is jealous for us to be. It is consistency in our walk. It is being people *who constantly do what is right.*

He Sent Forth His Word and Healed Them

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave. -Psalm 107:19-20

The recurring theme in this psalm is: *Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.* Four times this statement is interspersed in Psalm 107, which begins the fifth and final book that makes up the biblical collection of Psalms. As the psalmist recounts the faithfulness of the Lord, who responds to his people when they call out to him in times of trouble and distress, he tells of how the Lord specifically answered their cry for help: *He sent forth his word and healed them.*

When the Lord sends forth his word, you can expect results. I once saw a T-shirt that said, “I Believe in the Big Bang Theory...God Spoke, and Bang! It Happened.” As Psalm 33:6, 9 says, *By the word of the Lord were the heavens made... For he spoke, and it came to be....* When the Lord said, “*Let there be light*” (Gen 1:3), there was. Everything that there is came to be when the Lord spoke it into existence (see Hebrews 11:3).

Just as the creative power of the words of God formed the universe, the re-creative power of his words are able to bring healing. *He sent forth his word and healed them.* The agent that the Lord used to bring healing to his people was his word. He spoke, and bang, it happened. Have you noticed that every healing in the New Testament came by command? The centurion said to Jesus, *Just say the word, and my servant will be healed* (Mt 8:8). And that’s just what Jesus and his apostles did. They spoke forth the word and healing came.

God still heals today. He still sends forth his word to heal— but he uses our mouths to do it. It’s true. Don’t you know that *the tongue has the power of life and death* (Pr 18:21)? Jesus gave us authority to heal the sick. How do we do it? As ambassadors of Christ and by his authority, we send forth his word to heal. In your prayer closet it may be good to pray, “Lord, please heal this person,” but it is the authority of the word of God that goes out of your mouth that will bring healing and deliverance. If we can speak the “word of God” and see people get saved, how different is it to speak the word of God and see people get healed? The Father still sends forth his word to heal today—and he does it through us.

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For Those Who Fear Him

He provides food for those who fear him... -Psalm 111:5

Did you know that one of the promises in the Scriptures for those who fear the Lord is that the Lord will provide food for them? The following is a list of the other things that the Bible says are the benefits of the fear of the Lord:

- Prevents rash behaviors (Ge 20:11; 42:18; Lu 23:40).
- Makes you worthy to be appointed as a judge (Ex 18:21; 2 Ch 19:7).
- Helps you to do what is right (Ex 1:17).
- Keeps you from sinning (Ex 20:20).
- Motivates you to treat others with respect (Le 19:14; 25:17, 36; Lk 18:4).
- Produces good and just leaders (Le 25:43; 2 Sa 23:3ff).
- Causes you to keep the commands of the Lord (Dt 5:29; He 11:7).
- Brings prosperity and longevity (Dt 6:24; Ps 34:9; Pr 10:27; Ec 8:13).
- Provides protection from the reproach of your enemies (Ne 5:9; Ps 60:4).
- Breeds integrity (Ne 7:2).
- Brings you to a place where the Lord will confide in you (Ps 25:14).
- Prompts the Lord to bestow his goodness on you (Ps 31:19).
- Causes the eyes of the Lord to be upon you (Ps 33:18).
- Opens the way for the angel of the Lord to encamp around you (Ps 34:7).
- Brings salvation near to you (Ps 85:9; Is 33:6).
- Engenders the great love of God for you (Ps 103:11,13,17).
- Initiates wisdom (Ps 111:10; Pr 9:10; 15:33; Is 33:6; Mi 6:9).
- Confers the key to knowledge (Pr 1:7; Is 33:6).
- Ensures that the Lord will be your help and shield (Ps 115:11).
- Precipitates the blessing of the Lord (Job 1:1; Ps 115:13; 128:1; Ex 1:21).
- Moves the Lord to fulfill the desires of your heart (Ps 145:19).
- Causes the Lord to hear your cry and save you (Ps 145:19; Mal 3:16).
- Induces the delight of the Lord (Ps 147:11).
- Produces a hatred and avoidance of evil (Pr 8:13; 16:6).
- Saves you from death and leads to life (Pr 14:27; 19:23).
- Brings you wealth and honor (Pr 22:4).
- Keeps you true to the Lord (Jer 32:40).
- Causes the Lord to extend his mercy (Lk 1:50).
- Brings the acceptance of the Lord (Ac 10:2, 35).
- Inspires you in evangelism (2 Co 5:11).
- Prepares you for judgment (Rv 14:7).
- Leads to the glory and praise of the Lord (Rv 15:4; 19:5; Jnh 1:16).

This Is the Day the Lord Has Made

I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. -Psalm 118:21-24

After seeking the mind of the Spirit, the most important thing you can do to ensure that you are rightly interpreting the word of truth is to look at the context of the passage of scripture that you are studying. Yes, the word often has more than one meaning and application, but its primary meaning comes from its surrounding verses. Conceivably, no place in Scripture is this principle more evident than Psalm 118:24.

Most of us are familiar with the saying, *“This is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it.”* Our familiarity probably comes not so much from our study of Psalm 118

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but from worship settings where this verse was expressed as a call to worship or sung as a chorus. When we say it or sing it, we naturally apply it to the day that we are currently living, which is a healthy and altogether right thing to do. But the verse in its original context has a different and more profound meaning.

Verse 24, the verse in question, is preceded by another familiar passage: *The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.* We know from Mark 12:10 that this passage in Psalms is a prophetic description of the ministry of Jesus. He is the stone that the Jewish leaders rejected whom God chose to make the capstone of his plan of salvation. With a sense of prophetic amazement, the psalmist says that this thing is of the Lord and, *“It is marvelous in our eyes.”* And because he sees it as so marvelous, he continues and says, *This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

That day in which the rejected “stone” became the capstone is the most transcendent of all days. It is the one day most worthy to rejoice in and be glad about. I get chills thinking about how splendid that day really was. The Lord has done it and it is truly marvelous in our eyes. Let us rejoice and be glad.

Go ahead and continue to rejoice in the day in which you are living. But if you really want something to rejoice about, commemorate that day when the one who was rejected on your behalf became the cornerstone on which your salvation is built. *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

I Have Hidden Your Word in My Heart

How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. -Psalm 119:9-11

Virtually every one of the 176 verses of Psalm 119 is about the excellency of the word of the Lord. Eight Hebrew terms constitute the psalmist’s description of the word of God. The English equivalents in the NIV are: “Law” (*torah*: 25x); “statutes” (*eduth*: 22x); “precepts” (*piqudhim*: 21x); “decrees” (*choq*: 21x); “commands” (*mitsevah*: 22x); “laws” (*mishepat*: 21x); “promises” (*imerah*: 19x); and “word” (*dahbar*: 24x). Notice also that Psalm 119 has 22 stanzas, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza has eight verses, all of which begin with the particular Hebrew letter for that stanza. You may also notice that the eight different words that make up the psalmist’s descriptive repertoire of the word of God average 22 times each (a total of 175), which means that in each of the 22 stanzas, he is using each of the eight terms usually one time. All this adds a very unique literary piece to the corpus of the Bible.

“I have hidden your promises in my heart that I might not sin against you”

With that brief background, let’s look at one of the more well-known verses of Psalm 119: *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.* Most Christians think that hiding the word in your heart means Bible memorization. A deeper understanding, though, is to consider the word of God so valuably that you hide and protect it as you would a buried treasure. To that end then, memorization is a good thing. It is interesting that “word” would be translated thus by the NIV when it is not the Hebrew word *dahbar*, but *imerah*, which is normally translated, “promises.” My conjecture is that the King James translation had become so familiar that to render this passage, “I have hidden your promises in my heart that I might not sin against you,” would have been a disagreeable thing to do despite the greater accuracy. Think about the efficacy of the *promises* of the Lord to keep one from sinning when they are stored as a treasure in the heart. Since many of the Lord’s promises are conditioned on obedience, to sin against the Lord would actually make void and cause you to forfeit many great and precious promises. But if his promises are valued and hidden away in the place of your deepest affection, when faced with the prospect of sinning against God, the choice will be made to not sin. In this way, those precious promises will be truly hidden and guarded in the heart.

Your Word Is a Lamp to My Feet

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. -Psalm 119:105

No doubt you have had the experience of groping your way through a place devoid of light. You know the feelings that are present in such a situation: Tentativeness, apprehension, perhaps even fear. It is difficult enough going through a dark place that is familiar—like making your way through a blacked-out room in your home. But imagine the hesitancy that you would feel having to traverse strange territory without the aid of any light. What you wouldn't give for a flashlight or even a match.

The Psalmist says, *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.* This is a vivid depiction of one of the faculties of the word of God. God's word is just like that flashlight on a dark road. The light of his word does two things for you. It not only helps you to see where you are going, but also where you should be going. The word illumines both the hazards and the way of safety. What could be a more fitting description of the word of God than "light"?

The light of his word not only helps you to see where you are going, but also where you should be going

Since Psalm 119 is all about the "word of God," there are many other depictions of its faculties worth noting. By living according to the word a young man can keep his way pure (v9). For those who need guidance, the statutes of the Lord act as "counselors" (v24). Verses 50 and 93 say that the promises and precepts of the Lord preserve life. Wisdom is afforded through the commands of the Lord (v98), as well as understanding from his precepts (v104). And verse 130 beautifully reflects some earlier observations of the psalmist when it says, *The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.* The word of God gives light. It is light.

Jesus said, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life* (Jn 8:12). How appealing and profound is the prospect of never walking in darkness and always having the light of life? Jesus is the eternal Word of God made manifest in human form. It is by following him that a young man can keep himself pure. He is the "Wonderful Counselor." He is the one who preserves your life. All the treasures of wisdom and understanding are found in him. Whatever the word of God can do for us, he does for us, because he is the Word of God.

So, no more groping in the dark. No more tentativeness, apprehension or fear. Both the written and the incarnate word of God are yours as a lamp to your feet and a light to your path.

Those Who Sow in Tears Will Reap with Songs of Joy

Restore our fortunes, O Lord.... Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him. -Psalm 126:4-6

For seventy long years the Jews had been in exile away from their homeland, having been taken into captivity by the Babylonians. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion," the captives said (Ps 137:1). Three generations had known the pain of being separated from their homeland. There was a yearning to once again inhabit the beloved land that the Lord had given their ancestors. They were sowing in tears, but a day would come when they would reap with songs of joy.

At the end of their exile, it was time to finally return to Jerusalem (Zion). Psalm 126 is a song of ascent—a song that was probably sung as streams of post-exilic Jews "ascended" to Jerusalem for the Jewish festivals. It describes what it was like for those who experienced the return to the homeland: *When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy* (vs1-2). Because of the tears that had been sown in a foreign land, returning "home" was like a dream—and a dream-come-true. What had been sown in tears was now being reaped with songs of joy.

Tears which are sown as intercession to him will never go unnoticed

As the Jews sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept, there was no singing. They had hung up their harps and refused to sing, even when prodded by the Babylonians to sing one of the songs of Zion. Their answer to their captors was, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (Ps 137:4). They were sowing in tears. They would not sing. They could not sing. But a day was coming when they would sing the songs of Zion with joy.

God knows the end from the beginning. For those he calls his own, there is the hope that they who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. It's not over until the Lord says it's over. Not all tears are necessarily redemptive, but those which are sown as intercession to him will never go unnoticed. They will produce a harvest of joy for those who look to the Lord to restore their fortunes.

Yes, it does seem at times that the Lord allows too much suffering. But it also apparent that those in the kingdom who have suffered the most and sown the most tears are the ones who return with the most joy when redemption comes.

When Brothers Live Together in Unity

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!... For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. -Psalm 133:1,3

When I was a youth pastor,” our little youth group put together a musical and made arrangements to minister on seven consecutive Sunday evenings in seven different churches. On the sixth Sunday we traveled to a town where, years prior, a church split had resulted in two separate congregations. Both churches had recently gotten new pastors who were interested in healing some of the division of the past. It happened that the churches decided that their first “unity” service together would be for the musical that our youth group was bringing to one of the churches. The only way to understand what happened that evening was to have been there. The presence and power of the Lord for ministry and evangelism flooded that church and forever changed how the youth in our group understood ministry. We could not stop singing the praises of the Lord the entire two-and-one-half-hour ride home in the van that night.

The place of unity is where the Lord bestows his blessing

Because of our experience, we were primed for our seventh and final ministry date. We were practiced up, prayed up and fired up. As we began the musical, we felt a wall go up that we literally could not get past. The Spirit was completely quenched. The kids were so disappointed that they wept afterwards and asked, “What did we do wrong?” As we joined the congregation for refreshments following the service, a man from the congregation confided with me and said, “This congregation is in the middle of the biggest church fight you have ever seen.” ‘Nough said.

I have never experienced such a distinct illustration of the truth of Psalm 133: *How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil...running down on Aaron's beard,...It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.* True unity in the Spirit is priceless. It is where the Lord “commands” (KJV) his blessing. When the walls in the family of God come down, the Father is well-pleased to pour out blessings of life. Division breeds death because the devil steals, kills and destroys through division.

Jesus’ prayer in John 17 was that we would be brought to *complete unity*. Paul’s exhortation to the church in Philippians 2 was that we would be one in mind, love, spirit and purpose. We are to *make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* (Ep 4:3) because the place of unity is where the Lord bestows his blessing.

Let Burning Coals Fall upon Them

Let the heads of those who surround me be covered with the trouble their lips have caused. Let burning coals fall upon them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise. -Psalm 140:9-10

David was not averse to curse. Neither were the other songwriters of Israel. For as much beauty and words of blessing we find in the beloved Psalms, we also find a fair amount of “cursing.” What are we to make of it and what should we do with it?

Cursing, in the biblical sense, is not the use of profane language, it is speaking the opposite of blessing. When you curse someone you are speaking harm to come to that person. So, David curses his enemies: *Let burning coals fall upon them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise*—word pictures to edify your spirit. Of the many examples in the Psalms of calling down curses, perhaps the most disturbing is found in Psalm 137 where the people of Israel sang these words: *O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us--he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

Under the New Covenant, this type of cursing is strictly prohibited

When considering these disturbing revilements you need to remember that things were different under the Old Covenant. The cursing of your enemies was entirely appropriate because that covenant operated under the principle of *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* (Ex 21:24). If a person had wronged you, they deserved to be cursed. For the sake of justice, they needed to be cursed. It was the rule of the Law.

Under the New Covenant, this type of cursing is strictly prohibited. No more burning coals. Jesus rebuked James and John when they suggested calling fire down from heaven to destroy the Samaritan village that would not show hospitality to Jesus (see Luke 9:54). It was our Lord who said, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Mt 5:43-44) and, “*Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you*” (Lk 6:28). Paul said, *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse* (Ro 12:14). The day for cursing your enemies, or anyone else, is over.

If you are enamored with the idea seeing burning coals falling on your enemy’s head, there is a way. If he is hungry, feed him. If she is thirsty, give her something to drink (see Romans 12:20 & Proverbs 25:21-22). Then watch for the coals of conviction and the fire of repentance to fall upon them.

No One Living Is Righteous Before You

O Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief. Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you. -Psalm 143:1-2

I've noticed a funny quirk about how human beings see their own righteousness. Most people like to think they are good, but few are willing to argue the point. This schizophrenic viewpoint of our standing before God probably comes from the fact that we know that we were made to be righteous but must admit that we are not. Ironically, it's the admitting that we are not that will get us to where we want to be.

David states the obvious when he says to the Lord, "*No one living is righteous before you.*" This truth should be self-evident for *who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?* (1 Sa 6:20). Before the Righteous One of Heaven, who can be considered righteous?

Most people like to think they are good, but few are willing to argue the point

In many other places throughout the Bible, various persons are considered to be "righteous." David even refers to himself this way. Is he contradicting himself and the rest of Scripture when he says that no one living is righteous? David is speaking here of being perfectly righteousness, completely without fault. This is why he prays, "*Do not bring your servant into judgment.*" God's standard of judgment is perfection, and even though many of us would like to think that we have a standing before God because of numerous good deeds, the Lord of Heaven doesn't grade on a curve.

One thing about what David says here is somewhat consoling. When he says "no one living" is righteous, you could say that he was being fairly inclusive. There may be a strange comfort in the fact that we are all in the same boat and God knows we are all going down unless something can be done about it. And something has been done about it. Read Romans 3 to find out.

Let's dispel the myth of such a thing as a "good person." "*No one is good--except God alone,*" Jesus said (Mk 18:10). *There is no one righteous, not even one* (Ro 3:10). You may like to think that you, or others whom you look up to, are good, but let's face it, you are not and they are not. We all happen to be part of a race where no living person can stand before God as righteous in their own merit. So, admit it and do something about it while you are living. Because when you die, it won't matter how many nice things people say about you at your funeral—your claim before the throne of God to be a good person will be ludicrous.

Sing to the Lord a New Song

Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints. -Psalm 149:1

If your church experience has been anything like mine, you have seen some controversy over worship music. Though musical style is often at the forefront of the contention, the dispute usually comes down to those wanting to sing the old song versus those wanting to sing the new song. I have always been an advocate for singing to the Lord the new song.

First, let me acknowledge that the Psalm from which I take this commentary is an old song. The psalms which made it into the songbook of Israel got there, humanly speaking, because they were tried and true. They were the "great hymns of the faith." They were familiar to Israel and provided a sense of continuity with the historic faith of their ancestors. For me to sit before the Lord with a hymn book in hand and sing the old familiar songs Zion has not been uncommon.

It's safe to say your wife would prefer not to receive the same anniversary card every year

There is one thing to remember though about those old songs that we love so much: At one time they were new songs. At one time they were fresh from the heart of a worshiper—newly inspired by his or her communion with the Lover of their soul. Even more importantly, remember this: The word of God says, "Sing to the Lord a new song." I wonder if the reason that we like the old songs so much is because we like them so much. Does the inspiration to sing them come from the Spirit who leads us into true worship or from somewhere else?

Can we safely say that the Lord prefers to hear the new song rather than the old one? Yes! The Lord looks at the heart when we worship, but, all things being equal, he desires a fresh creative expression of our worship. You may love your wife sincerely, but it is probably safe to say that she would prefer not to receive the very same anniversary card every year. She desires to regularly hear a new expression of your love. She wants you to sing her a new song.

Granted, we all like our particular styles of music, and some styles are "newer" than others. But the question here is not about style. It is, "Are we going to sing old songs or new songs?" God has created us to pursue newness. Things naturally go "out of style." But singing the new song only because you like the new style is just as much "not about God" as preferring the traditional hymns because they remind us of the good old days.

Will we sing to the Lord a new song? Every Spirit inspired movement has, does and will continue to do so.

For Attaining Wisdom and Discipline

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young...-Proverbs 1:1-4

When I was in high school, I had a friend whose dad gave her an assignment to write out five verses from the book of Proverbs everyday. This was her practice throughout her teen years. No doubt, it was a contributing factor to her coming to know the Lord before she turned twenty and serving with her husband in pastoral ministry today.

The book of Proverbs states its purpose up-front: *For attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young.* The value of such a purpose could scarcely be underestimated.

From this book you can gain *wisdom and discipline*. These are the two main themes of the Proverbs. One-hundred and thirteen times a form of the word “wisdom” is used. Paul tells Timothy that the Scriptures *“are able to make you wise for salvation”* (2 Ti 3:15). I have a special place in my heart for this book of wisdom because it was a verse from this book that the Holy Spirit used to bring me to salvation in Christ. If you take these pithy sayings to heart and put them into practice, you will avoid much evil and do much good in life. Wisdom is not knowledge, nor is it “knowledge correctly applied,” as some have defined it. Wisdom is discerning the right thing to do or to say. The book of Proverbs will give you practical examples of what that specifically looks like.

To attain “discipline” is another reason for these proverbs. So many people fail to achieve their destiny for no other reason than a lack of discipline. A person who applies herself is better than the one who is talented (a little proverb to whet your whistle). If you are disposed to indolence and prefer to keep it that way, the book of Proverbs is not for you—then again, it probably is.

Knowledge, understanding, insight, prudence, discretion, and being able to do what is right and just and fair. These are the benefits that you can expect from a careful study and application of this unique book of the Bible. So, whadda ya say?

If You Look for it as for Silver

If you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. -Proverbs 2:3-5

A.W. Tozer said that a man knows about whatever he wants to. If he wants to know about fishing, he will know about fishing. If he wants to know about Italian cooking, he will know about Italian cooking. If he wants to know about politics, he will know about politics. Of course, the full extent of a person’s knowledge about a thing will be limited by his or her capacity to comprehend the subject matter—I’m not very likely to get a handle on quantum physics. But a person’s growth in the knowledge of the Lord depends almost entirely on his or her desire to seek after him.

God says, *if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out*

for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding (Pr 2:1-6).

Your knowledge of anything will depend on your desire to acquire it. If you have two capable high school kids with the same ability and one wants to learn and the other does not, their academic achievement will be vastly different. And in the halls of the kingdom of God, desire is even more advantageous because, there, your reward depends more on your aspirations than your abilities.

The benefits of *wisdom, understanding, insight, the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God* will be yours if you *turn your ear, apply your heart, call out, cry aloud, look, and search*. It has been said that you can have anything in life if you want it bad enough. That is not always true. But if you want God, you can have him. If you look for the truth of God like silver and search for it like a treasure—you are guaranteed to find it. Why is that? Because God *is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him* (Heb 11:6 KJV).

The truth is, I could know a lot more about physics than I do—if I really wanted. Not that I could be another Stephen Hawking, but if I applied my heart to understanding and sought after such knowledge, my adeptness in the discipline could take a quantum leap. But I ask you, how much better is it to seek and find the Author of physics?

If you are disposed to indolence and prefer to keep it that way, the book of Proverbs is not for you—then again, it probably is

Your knowledge of anything will depend on your desire to acquire it

Honor the Lord with Your Wealth, with the Firstfruits

Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. -Proverbs 3:9-10

When I joined my wife as pastor of a church a number of years ago, we took note that our church was not giving outside ourselves. Convinced that the Lord was not honored by this, we suggested that we begin to at least tithe from the monies that we received. For three years the position of the church board was that if we had extra, we would give it. The problem was that we never had extra. At one board meeting, we explained that operating on a “faith promise” principle, which is to give the money if it came in beyond our budget (the principle should have been called no-faith promise), was not working. We said that the more biblical principle was that of “firstfruits,” where you gave of the first of your income as a real act of faith, trusting the Lord to honor your giving. The Spirit unmistakably witnessed to this direction and we decided to test the Lord in the matter. That year turned out to be first year in about a decade that the church did not finish the fiscal year in the red.

It is not so much the “tithe” as the “firstfruits” that engenders the blessing of the Lord

You can argue that tithing is not specifically a New Testament principle, but I am not necessarily talking about tithing here. “Giving” is the operative New Testament principle, and to give out of the excess of what you have is not a faith act. For giving to be done in faith it either has to be from the firstfruits of your income (as a statement of thanksgiving to God for what he has provided and belief that he will continue to provide), or out of your lack (a la the widow and her two mites). When you give to the Lord out of the firstfruits of your wealth (yes, firstfruits means before taxes) you are honoring him. If he is of first priority in your life, the natural thing for you to do is to give to him first, and test his promise that if you do, *your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.*

The issue is not whether you are going to give the tithe, it is whether you are going to honor the Lord with the firstfruits. For most people who tithe, inherent in that tithe is the principle of firstfruits because most give it “off the top.” I believe that is why so many Christians have found that “tithing works.” It is not so much the “tithe” as it is giving the “firstfruits” in faith that engenders the blessing of the Lord. It happens that the Old Testament standard is the tithe and that should be used as a starting place. When you give, give first to the Lord and he will be honored—and he will in turn honor you.

Guard Your Heart, for it Is the Wellspring of Life

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. - Proverbs 4:23

The importance of a good security guard is often underestimated. He or she knows who should gain or be denied access to the building or complex for which they are responsible. The guard errs when allowing entrance to one who does not belong and may cause harm. The guard also errs when denying access to one who does belong and will do good. And so it is with whatever sentry we place at the door of our hearts.

When you read Proverbs 4:23, you can't help but think that you have come upon a profound truth. If you're like me, you think, “There is a depth to this statement that I want to explore.” Perhaps it is the eloquence that it embodies. Perhaps it is the word picture that it paints. Perhaps it is the weight that it carries. In any case, this verse of wisdom calls us to a lofty regard. It says, *“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”*

It is your heart that will dictate the pursuits and fruit of your life

“Above all else,” the NIV says. The NASB and KJV translate this phrase, “With all diligence.” A more literal translation could be, “With all guarding, guard your heart.” The first “guard(ing)” means, “to keep in custody,” and the second “guard” means, “to protect.” So we see, the most important thing that we can guard—the thing that we are to protect—is our hearts.

Why do we need to protect the heart? *For it is the wellspring of life.* Everything that flows out of your life, flows from the heart. It is your heart that will dictate the pursuits and fruit of your life. It is *out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks* (Mt 12:34). Your heart determines what you will value in life (see Matthew 6:21). We have to guard our hearts with all diligence for *out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander* (Mt 15:19). Those in my city who are responsible for the water supply, carefully guard what comes into it. They are diligent to check for chemicals and harmful bacteria. The quality of life in this city depends on that water supply. And the quality of your life depends on the quality of the wellspring of your life—your heart.

To guard your heart does not mean that you are afraid to open it to others or are unwilling to risk love. It means that the heart is too important to let just anyone or anything in that would pollute the wellspring of life. So, above all else, guard it with all diligence.

May You Ever Be Captivated by Her Love

May you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer--may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife? -Proverbs 5:18-20

Is it possible to always be sexually captivated with your wife?—to remain in love with her all the days of your life? Indeed. It is both possible and preferable because it is the will of God.

Solomon is warning his “sons” about falling into the trap of adultery—of being captivated by another man’s wife. His prescription for immunity to this lethal virus is simple: Be captivated with the love of your wife. He puts it rather engagingly saying, *“Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well”* (v15). If you are married, the Lord has given you a well of physical love from which you can drink. It is your well and it is your responsibility to make sure that the waters of romance and sexual love are flowing with the woman that God has given you. If it is not happening, the first place you should look to solve the problem is yourself. You are not to desire the water from another man’s well. You have your well and he has his, as it should be. Far too many have gone looking for water elsewhere. They say that the well of love they once had with the wife of their youth has dried up. Such a thing is an unnecessary tragedy.

This passage of Scripture should be very encouraging to every married man. It is possible to remain truly captivated (the KJV says “ravished” and the NASB says “exhilarated”) by the love of your wife. It should be possible to always see her as *a loving doe, a graceful deer*. The satisfaction that her breasts have brought you need not wane. Take captive every thought that would draw your attention away from her and onto another. She is the one who was made for you and you for her. Let yourself continue to be taken by her and to be excited by the pleasures of her affection. God has authored sexual love and sanctioned your marriage. There is divine blessing on you and your wife for nuptial bliss.

The world will say that the familiar is lackluster and that the novel is where you find excitement. But that is a carnal point of view. Being captivated with your wife is not carnal. It is spiritual. Just as your experience with the Lord is never meant to go stale, neither is your passion for your bride. It is the will of the Lord for you to always be captivated with her love.

How Long Will You Lie There, You Sluggard?

How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest--and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man. -Proverbs 6:9-11

For most of my life it has been a challenge to not sleep too much. When I was a kid, my mom had a dickens of a time getting me up and going. One evening, as a teen, I fell asleep and unknowingly punched my girlfriend who had come over and was trying to wake me up. At university, eight-o’clock classes were out of the question. When I became a Christian, my propensity to sleep too much was still with me—in fact it’s never left. So, as a new believer, I asked the Lord for help. One night as I went to bed, I asked the Lord if he would wake me at the time he wanted me to get up and give me the grace to do it. Sure enough, I woke up early, had my time with him, and went on to have a very productive day. It worked so well the first night, I asked the Lord again on the second night—and bingo—another great morning and productive day. I was learning to depend on the Lord in this area. From that point on I found that, without fail, whenever I asked the Lord to wake me—he would, although I have to admit that I sometimes would hit the snooze button on the Lord and go back to sleep. Many would say that this routine was psychosomatic but I believe it is the Lord who wakes me when I ask, and he has always been faithful to do so as I continue to depend on his waking voice.

As with most matters in life, it is vital to strike a balance of rest and work. You have probably known (or been) a “workaholic” or a “sluggard.” While both operate out of the flesh, the Scripture addresses the sluggard here. *How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A sluggard is one who is lazy, which means he or she sleeps too much and works too little. Too much sleep is not good for your revenue: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest--and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.* There are those who are truly disadvantaged in life for reasons beyond their making, but it should be noted that, in more cases than is politically correct to admit, poverty comes simply as a result of a lack of initiative.

I have found that sleep begets sleep and work begets work. A lack of initiative is usually connected to an immoderate amount of sleep. So, if you sleep too much, don’t be offended if the Bible calls you a sluggard. It may be the thing you need to get you going.

Her Slain Are a Mighty Throng

Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths. Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng -Proverbs 7:25-26

The book of Proverbs could not be much more adamant in its warnings to young men concerning the entrapment of sexual sin. Front and center are the severe consequences that one can expect from illicit sexual encounters with immoral and wayward women. The warnings against involvement with a woman of indiscretion are strong. Why? Because *her slain are a mighty throng*.

Concerning the *immoral woman* and the *wayward wife* (Pr 6:24), Wisdom says, *Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life* (Pr 6:25-26). The man who gives in to the allure of such women is as oblivious to the fate that awaits him as *an ox going to the slaughter, or a deer stepping into a noose* (7:22), *little knowing it will cost him his life* (v23).

Does the warning seem overly strong? Does sexual indiscretion really cost a man his life? Under the Law, it was supposed to (Lev 20:10). “But doesn’t Jesus forgive the adulterer—as in John chapter 8?” Yes, thank God. But those who have fallen victim to the snare of sexual indiscretion usually experience great loss. How many have lost their marriages, their ministries, their careers, their finances, their health and in some cases, yes, even their lives because of this pervasive snare? Regrettably, they have reaped what they have sown. As for the seducing woman, *many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng*.

“What about the woman as the victim?” That is a valid question, but the subject here is the spirit of the alluring woman who relishes her ability to seduce. What spirit is operative in Mrs. Robinson or the stripper or the playmate of the month? It should be obvious that she can indeed be seen as a victim, but there are still fateful consequences to her allurements. *Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng*.

Today, with the proliferation of Internet pornography, untold millions have been snared—and my guess is that most never escape. The same seducing spirit in Proverbs 7 that led the young man *to the slaughter* is alive and flourishing in the world today. We as men need to be aware of it and take this biblical warning seriously if we wish to be spared the fate of that mighty throng.

What spirit is operative in Mrs. Robinson or the stripper or the playmate of the month?

To Fear the Lord Is to Hate Evil

"I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion. To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech. -Proverbs 8:12-13

Let those who love the Lord hate evil, declares Psalm 97:10. Amos proclaims, *"Hate evil, love good"* (5:15). Paul exhorts the believers in Rome to *"hate evil and cling to what is good"* (Ro 12:9). The Lord loves those who hate evil. Since God is good, evil is the antithesis of God and his nature. To love God is to hate evil, and as Proverbs 8:13 says, *"To fear the Lord is to hate evil."*

If you will meditate on what it means to hate evil, it will produce insight into the Lord’s heart. To truly hate evil is to be in touch with the heart of the Lord. Think about what God hates. Think about what Jesus hated while on the earth. Proverbs 6:17-19 says that the Lord hates *haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers*. Injustice, lies, arrogance, dissension. These are the kinds of things that the Lord hates because they are evil. To what degree do we hate these things as well? Do we truly despise and are we troubled by the appearance of such things or do we have an attitude that tolerates, accepts or even precipitates the existence of evil? The pure in heart not only love good, they hate evil. And those who fear the Lord cannot tolerate the things that he would detest.

To hate evil, of course, does not mean that we loathe the evildoer. “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” may not be a quotation from the Bible, but the truth of it may be seen in the ministry of Jesus. And it needs to be seen in ours as well. When you have the heart of God and the mind of Christ, you love people and hate anything that will harm them. Evil can be defined as that which intends to bring ruin to the lives of people. This is why it is to be hated.

Hating evil is a choice. If you fear and love the Lord the choice will be natural. If you choose the fear of the Lord, you are choosing also to hate evil. And hate means hate. There is passion in hatred. We are not to be indifferent but passionate in our disdain for those things which steal, kill and destroy. And, we are to have a zeal in for those things that produce and maintain life.

So go ahead, hate evil with a passion. This is part of what it means to love the Lord and fear him.

When you have the heart of God and the mind of Christ, you love people and hate anything that will harm them

Wisdom Has Hewn out its Seven Pillars

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars. - Proverbs 9:1

Does “wisdom” have seven distinct pillars? Because seven is the number of completion, the reference to the number of pillars that make up the house of wisdom can be seen as merely symbolizing the perfection of wisdom. If wisdom does have seven particular pillars, they are not specifically named as such in the Scriptures (though some take James 3:17 to be the seven pillars). Nonetheless, I am intrigued with the idea that there could be seven distinctives upon which wisdom is built. If there are seven, these are what I think they would be:

The Fear of the Lord. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps 111:10; Pr 9:10).*

Humility. *With humility comes wisdom (Pr 11:2). The rod of correction imparts wisdom (Pr 29:15). Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom (Jas 3:13).* The reason the Lord gave Solomon so much wisdom was because he asked for it in humility.

Attentiveness. *Does not wisdom call out? (Pr 8:1). Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it (Pr 8:33). A wise man listens to advice (Pr 12:15). A wise son heeds his father's instruction (Pr 13:1). Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise (Pr 19:20). “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man” (Mt 7:24).*

Discernment. *Wisdom reposes in the heart of the discerning (Pr 14:33). God's secret wisdom...None of the rulers of this age understood it (1 Co 2:7-8).* Concerning Solomon, the Scriptures say that *he had wisdom from God to administer justice (1 Ki 3:28).*

Discretion. *“I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion” (Pr 8:12). The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways (Pr 14:8). He who holds his tongue is wise (Pr 10:19).*

Diligence. *Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise (Pr 6:6). “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man” (Mt 7:24). Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity (Eph 5:15-16).*

Proficiency. *He has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—And he has given...the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill (Ex 35:31, 34-35).* The word “skill” here is the same word translated “wisdom” elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Poverty Is the Ruin of the Poor

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor. -Proverbs 10:15

Some people say that money is power and I do not dispute that, but what I have more certainly discovered is that money is freedom. You can do what you want to do, go where you want to go and help those that you want to help if you have the money. Without money, there are many things that you might want, like or need to do, but would be unable.

I experienced this firsthand in a small but impacting way one afternoon. I had been attending an out-of-town conference with a colleague and we were staying at the home of his friend. Leaving earlier than I was expecting one morning, I left without my wallet. The conference had been intellectually as well as emotionally intense, and by this, the third day, I really felt the need to take a break from the afternoon workshops. What I

Money is freedom

especially wanted to do was to walk down to the nearby mall and get a paper and something to drink and sit in one of the nice sofas that the mall had provided for its patrons. But guess what? I had no money. I knew a handful of people at the conference and asked three persons if they could lend me ten bucks until the next day, but in a world where fewer and fewer people carry cash, none of the three people were able to help. I had my heart set on this little afternoon alone on the sofa with the paper and something nice to drink. But without the money, it was not going to happen, and I was frustrated about it. The fourth person I asked had the money to lend and I went happily on my way.

You may say, “Well that was no crisis.” That is exactly my point. If I could feel frustrated in that situation, what about people who are genuinely facing a crisis? How important is money to those who really need it? Money is freedom. This is the point of Proverbs 10:15: *The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor.* Money provides a certain protection for the rich but without it the poor can be ruined. Scripture does not teach that poverty is a good thing. It teaches that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions (Lk 12:15) and that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1Ti 6:10) and that those who want to get rich fall into a trap (1 Ti 6:9) and that those who are rich should not put their hope in their riches (1 Ti 6:17)—but it does not teach that poverty is a good thing. Yes, money can bring bondage, but for those who need it and can be entrusted with it, money does indeed bring freedom.

Poverty brings ruin. If this is true, it must be considered an enemy.

A Generous Man Will Prosper

One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. -Proverbs 11:24-25

The assumption is often made that those who give generously do so because they are prosperous—that generosity comes from prosperity. But, in reality, the reverse is true—prosperity comes from generosity.

One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. How can this be? It's what may be called, "the law of reciprocity" reflected in the words of Jesus: "*Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you*" (Lk 6:37-38).

The assumption is that generosity comes from prosperity. But, in reality, prosperity comes from generosity.

It may not make any earthly sense, but the one who gives freely is the one who gains, and the one who withholds when he should be giving, comes to poverty. How do you explain this irony? It all has to do with the fact that *God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Co 9:7) and he is against those who are *hardhearted* and *tightfisted* (see Deuteronomy 15:7-11). God sees what we give and what we withhold and rewards us accordingly. *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows...* (Gal 6:7). Regarding giving, Paul says, *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously* (2 Co 9:6). Who causes the increase but God himself? Randy White, pastor at Without Walls International Church in Tampa, Florida, says concerning money, "If God can get it through you, he will get it to you."

But you say, "I know some stingy rich people and they have not fallen into poverty as of yet." Fair enough—but it must be conceded that the miserly do not profit in the long run. Hoarding leads to losing. When your fists are closed, you can neither give to others nor receive from God and you will have to resort to worldly, even devilish, ways to make and keep your income.

Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Ac 20:35). Part of that blessedness is the reciprocity that is inherent in the giving.

He Who Works His Land Will Have Abundant Food

He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment. -Proverbs 12:11

For an intuitive dreamer like myself, this passage brings a much needed balance to my life. I continue to look for the big gusher of spiritual revival in my life and ministry, but I have to make sure that I do not neglect the daily tilling and working of the land that slowly but surely will bring forth fruit in my life and in the lives of those entrusted to my care.

He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment. My mother was a positive example of the truth of this Proverb. She was always diligent in whatever she put her hand to. Steadfast and unwearied in well-doing, she consistently cared for the needs of her husband and four children, managing her household duties like clockwork in addition to being a faithful worker in the church. When her youngest started school, she began a part-time job that eventually put me through college. When she died, she left an unexpected nest egg that allowed my wife and I to put a down payment on a house. She worked her land and produced an abundant crop.

We would be farther ahead if we concentrated on working the land instead of chasing the "big one."

The key to producing this abundant crop is to cooperate with the clear principle in God's natural order of gradual yet consistent growth for things that are planted and cared for. You can't build a city in a day or grow an oak tree overnight. But little by little what you build and tend with your hands will grow. But you must be diligent and consistent, otherwise the natural law of entropy will reverse the progress of your investment.

In the Bible, the person who *works his land* is put in juxtaposition with one who by lack of judgment *chases fantasies*. The difference, as I see it, is that one person is willing to be a diligent worker for his provision and the other wants to be able to have an abundance without putting in the effort. The latter is the one who is enticed by the "get-rich-quick" scheme. While there are those who do win the lottery and get in on the ground floor before the stock skyrockets, the vast majority of us would be much farther ahead if we concentrated on working the land instead of chasing the "big one."

Does this discount the supernatural or mean that we should forsake our dreams? No, what it means is that we have to have the judgment to discern the difference between faith and fantasy; aspiration and apparition. And it is likely that the greater the goal, the more that you will have to work your land.

Hope Deferred Makes the Heart Sick

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life. -Proverbs 13:12

We have all experienced the heartache of hope deferred—those longings and expectations that remain unfulfilled, at least for the time-being: The baby that hasn't come yet, the promotion that has passed you by, the special someone with whom to spend your life who is nowhere to be found. I could name a thousand more. *Hope deferred makes the heart sick.* But what happens when that baby comes, you get the promotion, and, low and behold, that special someone shows up on your doorstep convinced that you just happen to be their dream come true? It is a longing fulfilled and for you it becomes *a tree of life.*

Life is overstocked with hopes that are deferred and longings that remain unfulfilled. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) we cannot pick and choose what they will be. We have to deal with hopes that stay deferred and longings that may never be fulfilled. Sometimes the problem is that our hopes and longings are not credible but fantastic. Please don't hear me saying that dreams can't come true. Even the most implausible dreams have come to pass because people held on to them despite the hope that was deferred. However, we should seek the Lord regarding that for which we hope and desire, we must check the motivation of our hearts and we need to be open to what the Lord has to teach us in the seasons of hope deferred.

Joseph, Hannah and the disciples on the road to Emmaus are biblical examples of those who experienced the compound truths of this Proverb. My own church has experienced it as well. Our ardent hope for spiritual renewal seemed to be in a state of deferral. But things have changed. Our longings are being fulfilled and our satisfaction can be likened to eating from the goodness of the Tree of Life. As an indication of this, the Lord gave one of our young men a vision regarding the church. In it he came to a wall that impeded his progress. He looked for a way to go around or over, but could find none. He stepped back from the wall and saw the words "Hope Deferred" written across it. He then saw the hand of God placed against the wall. When he placed his own hand on the hand of God, the wall crumbled to reveal a beautiful vista full of lush vegetation.

Sometimes our hopes are deferred by our own disobedience or that of others—sometimes by the work of the enemy. And at other times—who knows? But don't lose hope. There is nothing like the taste of a longing fulfilled. And the longer the wait, the sweeter the fruit.

There Is a Way That Seems Right to a Man

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. -Proverbs 14:12

A bit of my testimony: As a fourth year university student, I was confronted with a besetting question that I now know to have been from the Holy Spirit. "Am I right with God?" was the question that kept coming to my mind. As I thought about it, I surmised that I must have been right with God. "I believe in God," I told myself. "I pray at night" (even if it was the same rote prayer every time). "My friends believe in God and we are all 'good guys,' even if we do like to party—so yes, I believe I am right with God."

Though I tried to settle the question, I was unable, so when someone told me about having a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ" I decided to retrieve my neglected Bible and start reading. The section with which I was most intrigued was Proverbs, and one night I read these words: *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end*

it leads to death. I was dumbfounded. "Could this be true of me?" I asked. I tried to shake the pointed truth of this word but my conscience wouldn't allow it. I was faced with the viable notion that I indeed was not right with God and, as a result, was on the road to death.

Very few who are on *the road that leads to destruction* (Mt 7:13) are cognizant of where they are really headed. The way seems right to them. And because the way seems right to so many others as well, there is this false sense of safety. It's security in numbers. It's a case of "I'm okay, you're okay." But in reality, it's more of a case of "I think I'm okay and you think you're okay so we all must be okay." And we all end up going where no one wants to go.

To avoid this fate we must realize that there are many ways that *seem* right, but, in the end, lead to death. Unless one is struck with the plausibility that he or she may be wrong, how can there ever be a revelation of what is right? The Pharisees remained blind because they would not consider the possibility of being wrong. We have to consider why the road we are on seems right to us. Is it that we think we are right with God, or that others say we must be right with God, or is it that God truly has declared us justified in his sight?

What seems right is not always what is right. And there is far too much at stake to ignore the Spirit of Truth when he comes knocking with some pertinent questions regarding what seems right—but just may be the way that leads to death.

A Gentle Answer Turns Away Wrath

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. - Proverbs 15:1

Can you recall a time when a gentle answer turned away wrath? How about a time when a harsh word stirred up anger? Who is unable to relate to the truth of this proverb? We all have been on the giving and receiving end of both a gentle answer that turned away wrath and a harsh word that stirred up anger.

A gentle answer is one that is “tender”—that comes from a heart that has not been hardened. A gentle word is not timid. It is from a place of strength. To answer kindly to an angry accusation or an insult is not a sign of weakness, but one of impressive self-control. Such an answer can have a powerful effect on people. Proverbs 25:15 says, *Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.*

To answer kindly to an angry accusation or an insult is not a sign of weakness, but one of impressive self-control

A harsh word, on the other hand, exhibits a lack of self-control.

It is a word that causes pain or trouble. It is a word that comes from and escalates anger. A harsh word *stirs up* anger. It brings it up, it calls it forth. A harsh word asks for trouble. Fistfights begin with harsh words. Add alcohol to the equation and a harsh word is bound to stir up angry waters (see Proverbs 20:1).

Does this mean that you shouldn't confront? Jesus did. I am convinced that the times when he was especially pointed in his rebuke of the Pharisees he meant to stir up a few things. But you have to believe that Jesus never spoke out-of-turn or made any pronouncement that was later regretted. Jesus affirmed the tender operation of the soul when he said, *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart* (Mt 11:29).

To be ready with a gentle answer that will turn away wrath is certainly the New Testament ideal. Listen to Paul's instruction: *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* (Eph 4:2-3); *Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive . . . Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them* (Col 3:12-13, 19).

A “gentle answer” is certainly harder to come by than the “harsh word.” If that harsh word has already been released, the tender message of “I'm sorry” is a powerful tool to restore peace. But how much better to be able to give the gentle answer that turns away wrath than the harsh word that stirs up anger.