

Proverbs 4 - Guarding the Tradition of Wisdom

I. Chapter Overview:

- A. The themes and instructions of this chapter seem to be repeats of what has been said in earlier chapters.
 - 1. At first glance, this appears to be mere repetition, perhaps for emphasis and memorization
 - 2. However, a major difference in chapter four is the lack of references to Yahweh.
 - a. This is even more striking when you consider the fact that Yahweh is a prominent figure in the previous chapter
 - b. *"In Chapter 3 we have the view from above; Yahweh is the one who teaches and disciplines, looks out and protects, and blesses the righteous. Chapter 4 gives us the view from below, in which fathers teach sons to observe the ways of both the righteous and wicked. It is a signal that this teaching comes from God."*¹
- B. Chapter four can be divided into three sections
 - 1. 4:1-9
 - a. Begins with "Hear, O Sons..."
 - b. The theme is, "The acquisition of the tradition of wisdom"
 - 2. 4:10-19
 - a. Begins with "Hear, my son"
 - b. The theme is, "Guarding Wisdom"
 - 3. 4:20-27
 - a. Begins with "My son"
 - b. The theme is, "Guarding your Heart"

II. (4:1-9) - Section One - The Tradition of Wisdom

- A. Translation
 - 1. Hear/listen O sons, the instruction² of a father and give attention to know understanding
 - 2. For good learning I give to you³
My instruction⁴ do not forsake
 - 3. When/for I was a son to my father

¹ Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 144.

² מוֹסֵר *mūsār* - Discipline, instruction, correction, chastening. In context, it is probably instruction

³ "You" here is plural

⁴ תוֹרָה *tôrāh* - Direction, instruction, law. In this context, it is probably more the idea of instruction

- tender and solitary before⁵ my mother
4. He taught⁶ me and said to me,
Grasp my words to your heart
Keep my commandments and live
 5. Acquire wisdom. Acquire understanding.
Do not forget, and Do not incline⁷
(away) from the words of my mouth
 6. Do not forsake her, and she will guard you
Love her, and she will watch over you
 7. The beginning⁸ of wisdom. Acquire wisdom.
And in all your acquisitions, Acquire understanding
 8. Exalt her, and she will raise you high
She will honor you when you embrace her
 9. She will give to your head a wreath of grace
A crown of beauty she will deliver you

B. (v.1-2) - Introduction

1. The typical appeal to listen to the instruction of a father
2. The scene changes, because the pronouns are now plural. The address is now to a group of learners
 - a. The setting of wisdom in the Ancient Near East was in the home
 - b. But it was also in the setting of a "school" for wisdom
 - c. Professional sages taught wisdom and advised rulers⁹
- A Biblical example of this sort of thing is 1 Kings 12
3. One can make a point that there is more to learning than academics
 - a. An academic focus on learning teaches "facts"
 - b. The learning of Proverbs is about wisdom and skill for life, heart knowledge, not merely book knowledge
 - c. This is a good warrant to evaluate our teaching methods

C. (v.3-5) - The Tradition: Passing on a Legacy of Wisdom

1. The father is attempting to pass on the accumulation of generations of teaching to his sons. Includes, insights, teachings, and even stories.

⁵ לִפְנֵי *lipnê* - Literally, "to the faces of." "Face" is also an idiom for "presence." Therefore, this means to "be before" someone or to "be in the presence of" someone

⁶ יָרָה *yārah* - To teach, instruct. This is the noun form of תּוֹרָה *tôrāh* - instruction, direction, law

⁷ נָטָה *nāṭāh* - To stretch out, spread out, extend, incline, bend

⁸ רֵאשִׁית *rē šît* can be used temporally - "beginning" or spatially - "chief, head, choicest, etc."

⁹ Michael V. Fox, "The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs," In *Text, Temples, and Traditions* ed. Michael V. Fox, Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, Avi Hurvitz, et. al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 227-239.

2. This affirms that there is value in tradition
 - a. Tradition or "traditional" often has a negative connotation
 - b. A good exercise might be to reflect on this quotation:
"Tradition is the living faith of those now dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of those still living." - Source unknown
3. Other passages:
 - a. Deut 6:6-7 - The command to pass on God's instruction to children
 - b. 2 Tim 1:5; 2:2 - Timothy's faith passed on
 - c. Jud 2:10-23 - Failure of the fathers to pass on their traditions
 - d. The picture we have in 1 Samuel is that the failure partially was due to the father's leadership of the children
 - 1) Eli (1 Sam 3:10-14)
 - 2) Samuel (1 Sam 8:1-5)
 - a) Samuel's sons did not walk in his ways
 - b) The people wanted leadership, and asked for a king

4. Song:¹⁰

Holy words long preserved
for our walk in this world,
They resound with God's own heart
Oh, let the Ancient words impart.

Words of Life, words of Hope
Give us strength, help us cope
In this world, where e'er we roam
Ancient words will guide us Home.

CHORUS:

Ancient words ever true
Changing me, and changing you.
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart.

Holy words of our Faith
Handed down to this age.
Came to us through sacrifice
Oh heed the faithful words of Christ.

Holy words long preserved
For our walk in this world.
They resound with God's own heart
Oh let the ancient words impart.

CHORUS x4

We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart.¹¹

¹⁰ CCLI# 1231384

¹¹ Michael W. Smith, *Ancient Words*, (Mobile, AL: Integrity Worship, 2002)

5. Relevant Quotations:

1. *"A wise man learns from the mistakes of others. Nobody lives long enough to make them all himself." - Source Unknown*
2. *"For every man, education should be a process which continues all his life. We have to abandon, as swiftly as possible, the idea that schooling is something restricted to youth. How can it be, in a world where half the things a man knows at 20 are no longer true at 40--and half the things he knows at 40 hadn't been discovered when he was 20?" - Arthur Clark*

D. (v.5-9) - The supremacy of Wisdom

1. The beginning or head of wisdom is to acquire wisdom
 - a. Humans spend a lifetime acquiring things
 - b. Wisdom should be at the head of that list
 - c. Luke 12:16-21 - If you acquire only things, they will perish
 - 1) We must be "rich" towards God
 - 2) Col 3:16 - Word is to dwell in us richly in all wisdom
 - a) The context tells us what the evidence of this is
 - b) Godly, righteous living is evidence of this wisdom
 - c) This wisdom is related to God's word "in" us
 - d. We should make an effort to acquire wisdom harder than we do to acquire other things
2. Exalt wisdom
 - a. Wisdom should be the highest priority
 - b. Wisdom brings safety and honor
 - c. Exalting wisdom means to
3. Do not forsake her
 - a. The acquisition of wisdom is never ending
 - b. Examples of those who forsook wisdom
 - 1) 1 Kings 12:1 - Rehoboam
 - a) He did not listen to the wise counsel of the elders
 - b) He acted within his rights, but did not act wisely
 - c) The result was division
 - 2) Josh 9:14 - Gibeonites
 - a) They did not seek the Lord's counsel
 - b) They proceeded on their own wisdom
 - c) As a result, the Gibeonites became a snare to them
 - b. If you are faithful to wisdom, you will receive grace¹²

E. It is helpful to reflect on the sources of godly wisdom

¹² חֵן *hēn* Grace simply means, "favor." The idea of "unmerited" favor is influenced by Lutheran theology

III. (4:10-19) - Section Two: Guarding Wisdom

A. Translation:

10. Listen my son and take my words,
and years of life will become many to you
11. In the way of wisdom I taught you
I have caused you to tread in the tracks¹³ of uprightness¹⁴
12. In your walking, your step will not be tied up¹⁵
and if you run, you will not stumble
13. Take hold¹⁶ of instruction. Do not let go.
Guard her, for she is your life
14. In the path of wicked ones do not go
and do not go on in the way of evil ones.
15. Let it/him¹⁷ alone. Do not pass by it/him.
Turn aside from upon it/him and pass over.
16. For they do not sleep if they do not do evil.
And they are torn from their sleep if they do not cause to stumble¹⁸
17. For they eat the bread of wickedness
And the wine of violences they drink
18. But the path of righteous ones is like the light of brightness
going and shining until the establishing of the day
19. The way of wicked ones is like the darkness¹⁹
They do not know on what they stumble.

B. (v.10-12) - Unrestricted Travel through Life

1. The wise teacher leads his students in the tracks of uprightness
 - a. Tracks or "ruts" suggests a well-worn path
 - 1) The image is of a road that is old and trustworthy
 - 2) Obstacles and dangers have been removed
 - b. I have caused you to tread
 - 1) Image of where feet walk
 - 2) Not on the rough ground, but smooth paths
 - 3) The teacher "caused to tread," in other words, led him to the good paths.
2. The well worn path is safe
 - a. Stumbling stones have been removed and rough spots

¹³ מַעֲגָל *ma'gāl* - Track, entrenchment, path. The image is of ruts from a well worn path.

¹⁴ A smoother translation would be - "I have led you in the paths of uprightness"

¹⁵ צָרָר *sārar* - to bind, tie up, be restricted, narrow, scant, cramped.

¹⁶ חָזַק *hāzaq* - Root idea is strength, to be strong. The Hiphil form of this word means to seize, take hold of, prevail upon, or to make firm.

¹⁷ The pronouns here could refer to either a person, or a thing.

¹⁸ כָּשַׁל *kāšal* - Root meaning is stumbling, or tottering. The form of the word, "cause to stumble" usually means to throw someone to the ground, or to overthrow.

¹⁹ אַפְלָה *āpēlāh* - Deep darkness. Sometimes used of supernatural darkness

smoothed

- b. To leave the path would be to face vines that can cause you to get "tied up" or rough spots that can cause stumbling and injury
 - 3. In modern times, the image might be that of a highway
 - a. To go off road could be hazardous
 - b. Need to stay on the well-worn path of wisdom
 - 4. It would be helpful to reflect on sources of non-wisdom that cause our step to get tied up and tangled and cause stumbling
 - a. Well-worn paths can look like the best way, but it takes wisdom to recognize it for what it is
 - b. Matt 7:13-14 - The narrow and broad ways
 - c. It would also be helpful to identify popular (worldly) wisdom, proverbs, sayings, etc. that might seem accepted, good and wise, but are in fact just the opposite.
- C. (v.13) - Hold on to Wisdom with all your might
- 1. Take hold of, or "seize" instruction.
 - 2. Image of being in love and never letting go
 - 3. "Guard" her. In interesting choice of words
 - a. This implies that there are enemies or dangers to wisdom
 - b. Guarding something requires several things
 - 1) Vigilance and watchfulness
 - 2) Understanding what dangers there are
 - a) 1 Peter 5:8 - Satan prowls around
 - b) Col 4:2 - Alertness comes through prayer life
 - c)
 - b. It would be helpful to reflect on the enemies of wisdom
- D. (v.14-17) - Don't Go There
- 1. Do not even go near the wicked, or the path of the wicked
 - a. 1 Thess 5:21-23 - Abstain from every form²⁰ of evil
 - 1) In context, this almost sounds proverbial in form
 - v.21b - "Hold fast to what is good
 - v.22 - "Abstain from every appearance of evil"
 - 2) Everything needs to be examined
 - b. 2 Cor 6:14-7:1 - Do not be bound together with unbelievers
 - c. 1 Cor 15:33 - Bad company corrupts good morals
 - 2. In contrast, there are passage that seem to speak of the opposite
 - a. 1 Cor 5:9-10 - Cannot disassociate yourself with people of the world
 - b. 1 Cor 9:19-23 - The purpose of our associations
 - 3. It would be helpful to reflect on when an association is good or bad
 - What principles can guide us in determining when to come out and be separate, and when to associate?

²⁰ εἶδος *eidōs*- Outward appearance, visible form. The idea is to abstain from every appearance of evil, to stay away from any manifestation of it.

4. They eat and drink wickedness and violence
 - a. Their sustenance is wicked violence
 - b. The only way they feel "satisfied" is when they have had their fill of wicked violence
 - c. To them, being "full" of wickedness feels wholesome, like having a good meal. It feels good and right to them
 - d. They can lure you into thinking and feeling the same way
 - 1) Negative influence is powerful yet subtle
 - 2) The best defense is to keep your distance
5. On finding a balance between being in the world, but not of it
 - a. Consider an illustration from life:

When you know someone who is very sick with a contagious disease, you keep your distance. Usually, the only reason you would get close would be to serve or minister to them. When you are helping or encouraging them, you are usually acutely aware that you could get sick as well, so you take precautions. You do such things as wash your hands, and maybe even wear a surgical mask. The thought in your mind is to help them. In like manner, when you are dealing with someone who is sick with sin, you stay aware that sin is contagious. You inoculate yourself with prayer, and with constant reminder that your purpose is to bring healing, so as to avoid the type of contact and influence that can sway you to start straying from God. This is largely a matter of good, sound, judgment, which calls for wisdom and discernment.

- b. It is a good exercise to reflect on principles for determining when a relationship with an unbeliever can wind up being hazardous.

E. (v.18-19) - Contrast of the righteous and the wicked

1. For the righteous, we have the image of positive progression
 - a. Path of the righteous is like the path of the sun
 - b. Begins with a flicker of light behind the horizon
 - c. It grows in warmth and brightness
 - d. Finally, the day is "established."
2. Right living and light are often connected in scripture
 - a. Eph 5:8-13 - Living as children of light
 - d. 1 Thess 5:4-6 - Being aware or enlightened and living right
 - c. 2 Cor 4:6 - Light of the glory of God in us (see context too)
 - d. Matt 5:14-16 - We are the light of the world
 - e. Isa 42:5-7; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23 - A light to the nations
 - f. Isa 58:6-11 - Our righteousness like the dawn
 - g. 1 John 2:8-11 - Walking in the light is walking in love
3. A good reflection would be to reflect on what the image of the sunrise in this proverb communicates about the character of the righteous
 - a. The righteous progress from good to better
 - b. The righteous give warmth and comfort

- c. The righteous contribute to "life"
- d. The righteous bring joy and peace
- 4. For the wicked, the text gives us the image of darkness
 - a. This is a deep, groping, thick darkness
 - b. It is so dark, that the wicked cannot even identify what they stumble on
- 5. The theme of blindness and darkness
 - a. Matt 15:14 - The blind leading the blind into a pit
 - b. Matt 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26 - The woe's on the "blind" Pharisees
 - c. John 9:41 - The Pharisees and the healed blind man who now "sees" Jesus
 - d. 1 John 2:11 - Those who hate live in darkness
 - e. Rev 3:17 - Blind do not realize they are blind
 - f. Matt 6:19-24ff - Eyes blinded by self centeredness
- 6. A good reflection would be to reflect on what this image of darkness communicates about the wicked
 - a. Fear - Those who live in darkness live in fear
 - b. Uncertainty - Those who live in darkness don't know where they are going
 - c. Injury - Those who live in darkness stumble and injure themselves since they don't know where to turn or go to
 - d. Despair, depression - Those who live in darkness experience a type of gloom
 - e. Cold - Those who live in darkness lack the warmth of God's love
- 7. The light can only increase in your life through keeping hold of wisdom, instruction, righteousness and godliness

IV. (4:20-27) Section Three - Guarding Your Heart

A. Translation

- 20. My son, to my words give attention
To my sayings incline your ear
- 21. Do not let them depart from your eyes
keep²¹ them in the midst of your heart
- 22. For life are they to those who find them
And to their whole flesh, health²²
- 23. From the whole guard post,²³ guard²⁴ your heart

²¹ שָׁמַר *šamar* - To keep, preserve, watch over, guard. This word is used in several senses. As a participle, שָׁמֵר *šōmēr* it is used as a noun which means, "watchman," "guardian," or "keeper," as in "brother's keeper" in Genesis 4:9.

²² מַרְפֵּא *marpē* - This is used to mean health, or healing, depending on the context

²³ מִשְׁמָר *mišmār* - Used to mean prison, guard house, guard post, or simply the act of guarding. The word is etymologically derived from שָׁמַר *šamar* - To keep, preserve, watch over, guard.

²⁴ נָצַר *nāšar* - To watch or guard from dangers. A different but similar word to שָׁמַר *šamar*

- For from it are the outgoings²⁵ of life
24. Put away from you crookedness of mouth
And perverseness of lips remove far from you
 25. Your eyes to the front let them look
And your eyelids²⁶ make straight before you
 26. Keep straight the track/entrenchment²⁷ of your feet
And all your ways will be established²⁸
 27. Do not veer²⁹ right hand or left hand
Turn away your feet from evil

B. The major message of this section is steadfastness

C. Use of body parts to communicate the need for steadfastness

1. Ear

- a. v.20 - Incline your ear - In other words, "listen closely"
- b. The image is of leaning in to listen to good words
- c. What does it take to listen?
 - 1) 1 Kings 19:12-13; Jas 1:19-27 - Quietness
 - 2) Mark 4:11-12 - Honesty
 - 3) Jas 1:21 - Humility

2. Eyes

- a. v.21 - Do not let them depart from your eyes
- b. v.25 - Keep your eyes straight before you
 - 1) Do not get distracted, stay focused
 - 2) Keep them at the center of your goals
- c. What does it take to stay focused?
 - 1) Num 13:25-33 - Focus on God, not giants
 - 2) Heb 11:8-16 - Do not look back, but forward to God's promise
 - 3) 2 Pet 3:17-18 - Be on your guard
 - 4) Heb 12:1-3 - Fix our eyes on Jesus - Imitate him
 - 5) Psalm 51:10; 1 Thess 5:17 - Pray

3. Heart

- a. v.21 - Keep them in the midst of your heart
- b. v.23 - Guard your heart

²⁵ תֹּשָׁאוֹת *tôšā'ôṭ* - Noun meaning extremity or outgoing. It is used of an the border or extremity of a territory. It is etymologically derived from יָצָא *yāšā'* which carries the root meaning, "to go out" or "to go forth."

²⁶ עִפְעָף *ap'ap* - Eyelids. Sometimes this is nearly synonymous with eyes.

²⁷ מַעְגָּל *ma'gāl* - "track, course, entrenchment, course, or path," emphasizing the well-worn path

²⁸ כֹּון *kûn* - To be established, made firm, made secure, made stable. The idea here is that the path will be a secure, stable path

²⁹ נָטָה *nāṭāh* - To bend, turn, or incline

- c. How do you do this?
 - 1) Eph 4:31-32 - Choice: Be forgiving, or be defiled
 - 2) Josh 1:8; Psa 1:2ff - Meditate on it, and be blessed
 - 3) Job 31:1; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1; 1 Thess 4:4 - Take care what you see or listen to. Make a covenant with all body parts.

4. Mouth

- a. v. 24 - Put away a crooked, perverse mouth
- b. Related Passages
 - 1) Mark 7:14-23 - The mouth can defile the heart
 - a) Might not be able to control a random thought
 - b) When the thought comes out, it can defile
 - c) It is important to guard your mouth
 - 2) James 3:6 - The tongue can ruin your life, bridle it

5. Feet

- a. v.26 - Keep your feet in a straight path before you
- b. Related passages
 - 1) Matt 7:13-14 - Stay on the narrow way
 - 2) Matt 6:33 - Seek his kingdom first

6. Right and left hands

- a. v.27 - Do not bend to the right or left
- b. How do you stay on the straight and narrow?
 - 1) Jud 21:25; Prov 3:5-7; 12:15 - Do not be wise in your own eyes
 - 2) Hos 4:12 - Avoid the spirit of harlotry
 - 3) 2 Cor 11:3 - Stay simply devoted to Christ
 - 4) Heb 3:10-14 - Encourage each other

D. Benefits of steadfastness in living according to godly wisdom

- 1. v.22 - Life³⁰ and health
 - a. Gal 2:20 - For the Christian, there is a different kind of life
 - b. Once again, this should not be taken as an iron-clad cause and effect law. These are general principles for general truths.
 - 1) There are times when because of being wise and godly, you are still persecuted and suffer hardship
 - 2) Example - Daniel 1-6. Daniel was persecuted, but in the end always came out on top
- 2. v.26 - Stability and security
 - a. James 3:17-19 - To be unwavering is to be wise, and gain peace
 - b. Phil 4:4-9 - Wisdom and peace brings an inner stability

³⁰ For more on "life," see notes from 1:1-2

Discussion Questions for Proverbs 4

(4:1-9)

1. What are some things you wish to acquire in your lifetime?
2. Why should wisdom be at the top of your list of desired acquisitions?
3. What are some of the sources of godly wisdom in your life?
4. How does the passing down of the traditions of your parents, ancestors, and elders fit into your acquisitions? What value is there in it?
5. Traditions passed down can include advice, experiences, lessons learned, and stories. What are some "traditions" you can pass on that would be precious or beneficial?

(4:10-19)

6. Identify some of the "paths" that appear to be smart, wise, popular, in, etc. that are really not. What are some of the messages of these paths? How are we tempted to walk in these paths?
7. We are told to hold onto wisdom with all our might, and "guard" her. What are some enemies of wisdom that can cause danger to wisdom?
8. In this section there are several ways of saying "don't go there" because there are some paths that will cause you a fall. Why such an emphasis on staying away from these paths?
9. How do you balance staying away from wickedness and going into all the world to evangelize? Can you do both? How? Does the description of the righteous being like the rising sun help with this possible dilemma?

(4:20-27)

10. Taken as a whole, what do the numerous references to body parts communicate to you about walking in godly wisdom?
11. Which of these images (ear, eyes, heart, etc.) in this section resonate the strongest with you? Why?
12. What can you do to guard yourself and remain steadfast and true as you go through life?