

PROVERBS

Growing up in Northwestern Ontario, one of the ways that we made it through the long winters was to embrace the cold and snow. From an early age, my grandparents would take me out cross-country skiing to Kamview Nordic Centre where there were many miles of groomed trails.

At the start, my grandma would insist that we head out on the Jackrabbit trail – a short 1.2 km loop that was fairly flat. The groomed trails through the balsam forest gave me the opportunity to get the feel for the rhythm, movement, and coordination that was needed to go. Every steep and slide on the path would help me along the way. At first, I was anything but a jackrabbit – it would take some time to get around that short loop.

I always wanted to get to Tamarack Trail – it had the big, long hill with the chalet at the top where there was hot chocolate served to the skiers who needed a warm up. I wasn't interested in the hot chocolate in the chalet – I wanted to get to the hill. It was the one place where there was no groomed trail because skiers needed the flexibility to move their skis going down the long slope. In no time I had learned the skill of navigating cross-country skis and was on the Tamarack Trail.

But there was a place that was marked “off limits” – the path was clear, and it looked fun and challenging, but it was clearly a ‘no-go’ section. Yet there was something that seemed appealing about the path – the steep decline of the hill looked fun, it was narrower, and the trees were closer to the path. As fun as it would be, there was no going there. I was warned – stay off that section. It'll lead to trouble!

Proverbs presents the choice we have in life as two paths – there are those that are groomed for our success, setting us on a course that teaches us to grow and improve in our skills; and there is also a path that is marked ‘no-go’.

In Proverbs 4, we come to this theme again – repeated for us, and we need to talk about why Proverbs repeats so much. So let's consider why Proverbs presents only two paths.

Choose the Path of Life

We hear this father giving his son instructions to hear and accept his words because his desire is for his son to have long life. And this is what good parenting does – it wants the best life possible for children. As imperfect as parents are, they want better for their children. It wants to see them grow, flourish, succeed, and find that there is an abundance of life to be enjoyed. At the heart of every good parent is this desire.

But to get our children on that path, they are going to have to learn. They can learn either by embracing instruction, or they can learn the hard way by having to figure out life for themselves. Proverbs makes it clear that listening to a good parent will actually set up a child

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for success in life, and it commends the home as the best avenue for personal growth of children.

The desire of parenting is for children to not merely obey their parents, but to internalize their instruction. I remember when I was growing up – there were two ways I could obey – I could obey my parents by saying, “Fine!” in my heart, doing the task because I had to, but grumbling the whole time. Or I could say “I will” and see how doing the task with a good attitude made everything better.

This is God’s desire for us with him – that we internalize his truths. If we see his commands as a bunch of rules, we have missed his heart for us. That’s like saying, “Fine!” But God’s word is to be internalized. This was Moses’ point when he was teaching the children of Israel the law. He wanted them to internalize the law, not merely have them write the law on doorposts and on their wrists. He wanted them to take it into their heart, to follow the ancient way.

One of the tasks of parenting is to learn and grow in the ways of teaching and guiding that is compelling. Parenting is one of the hardest things we ever do as humans. We are working to show our children the good path, the better way, and compel them in it by teaching and leading them. All the while we are still learning to walk on the way that we were taught, to follow the way that was shown to us to bring life.

It seems that this son has started down the path of wisdom. His father recognizes it. He’s lead him on paths of uprightness, or straight paths. This was the path described as the one who trusts the Lord in Prov. 3:5-6, and the Lord leads them to upright or straight paths. That is the same idea here. And what we are told about this path of life is that it won’t cause you to stumble. It’s a safe path. It’s a straight path. Why is it a straight and good path? Because it is the path that God blesses, the path that is free from God’s judgment. It is a path that is like the one Isaiah described in Isaiah 40:30-31 – that it won’t weaken or weary you.

So there are three commands in v. 13 that the father gives. First, he says to keep hold of this instruction. This has the idea of disciplining oneself – and the word for “instruction” is the same word used for discipline. We could picture this “keeping hold” to be like an athlete who is taught how they can achieve success. First, they’ve got to work out. They need to exercise their muscles and stay physically fit. Second, they’ve got to stick to their diet. They need to eat foods that supply the health and nutrients that will make them strong and provide their body with everything needed to grow. By limiting themselves with good discipline, it will keep them from stumbling.

Second, he says not to let go. This means not to slack off. We know how hard this is. We all make New Year’s resolutions – I’m going to pay off debt, I’m going to lose weight. I’m going to eat healthier. And what we find is that our will slowly erodes over time. We return to the fridge

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for that late night snack. We spend money that we didn't have on something we saw and wanted now. But the father's instruction is to discipline yourself and not let go.

Third, he says to guard this way because it is for your life. Now it becomes clear that what needs to be guarded is wisdom itself, because it is described as guarding "her". And we will see in a few minutes what this life is. It is more than just enjoying life from the cradle to the grave.

Avoid the Path of Darkness

The second half now instructs us to avoid the path of the wicked. In fact, in vv. 14-15, we have 6 commands piled up on top of one another. It starts by saying not to even enter in to the path. Like Psalm 1, once you set foot on the path of the wicked, you'll go from walking to standing to sitting in evil. The movement in Psalm 1 is of a person who starts on the path, then stops and takes it in, then sits down and becomes part of it. The same idea is here. Don't enter it, because you'll start walking on it. In fact, it's something you should avoid, turning away from entirely.

This is what evil does. At first, you say, "I'll just take a little look." But soon, you find that you're not looking, but you're exploring it a bit more. "I can quit at any time," the fool says, thinking that they won't get ensnared.

But Psalm 1 is like what Proverbs 4:16-17 says. The way of the wicked is addictive. They can't sleep. Evil becomes the very nature of the person who has walked down this path. They are literally robbed of sleep. What they eat is the bread of wickedness and the wine of violence. In other words, what they consume they become, and soon they want to lead others in that path. In one sense, this is what Psalm 115 describes – that what you revere you will resemble. The gods of the nations – they have no feet, hands, mouths, nothing – and those who worship them become like them.

This is described in v. 19 as the path of deep darkness. It's the path that leads to death. And we are told that those who are trying to make others stumble (v. 16) actually become those who stumble themselves.

And all of this is intended for us to...

See the Wisdom of Christ

As much as we would like to think that there are multiple paths to enjoy life, what Proverbs says is that there are two paths. There is the path of life and the path of death. There is the path of light and the path of darkness.

The dark path, the path of death, just feeds this pattern more and more. Those who try to cause others to stumble will stumble themselves. We saw this in chapter 1:17 – they lay a trap

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and get trapped themselves. Jesus told us that those who follow in sin are enslaved to sin (Jn. 8:34-36). Sin sets a trap for those who walk in it. Those who think they can dabble in it and leave at any point discover that they are caught in the very trap that they lay out.

But the life that is offered to us is not merely the life from cradle to grave. The path of life that is offered is the one that Jesus says – “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). He is the light that overcomes our darkness (Jn. 8:12), and he promises that he will lead us on the path of life and light forever.

As we walk in the light in this life, it is the light that confesses that Jesus knows the way to life and light. It is our confession that the true Son came and obeyed his Father perfectly, going to the cross to break the power of the bondage of sin that holds us back from the way of life. He came to free us from the trap that we had set for ourselves. He comes and sets the prisoner free. His path does not cause us to stumble or fall – as Jude says: to him who is able to keep you from falling and present you unstained before his glorious throne with great joy (Jude 24). It is for this freedom that Christ came, Paul tells the Galatians (Gal. 5:1).

By breaking us free from the trap of sin, what Christ does is he puts within us the desire to obey. No longer are his commands burdensome, but a joy (1 Jn. 5:2-3). And that joy is because he has given us the righteous path – the path of the gospel. This path of uprightness, the straight path, is the gift that we receive by grace through faith apart from our own effort.

And what is glorious is that one day he will bring to us the fullest expression of life – the city of life and light. John describes it in Revelation 21:22-22:5. It is the city of life and light forever where we will never walk in the path of darkness or in evil.

Right now, we are learning. We have to be reminded of the same things over and over. Proverbs does this because it knows that children need multiple reminders in order to grow wise. And the structure of Proverbs is that it moves from simple, black and white concepts to the depths and beauty and complexity of wisdom in all of life.

So if it seems like we’re going on the same path over and over and over, consider it to be the Jackrabbit trail – teaching you how to get your stride, learning to slide those skis one after another, so that when you hit the Tamarack Trail and the hill that comes so that you enjoy this life by resisting the temptation of the forbidden path that’s off-limits so that you might know the eternal joy of the Lord.