

Back in Princeton visiting friends when Noah was a toddler, we were relaxing outside near a community bench that had been tipped over. Noah was toddling around the bench and then Cas noticed he had stopped on the other side of it and was quiet...never a good sign with a toddler. When she walked around to see what he was doing, she found Noah eating chewed gum off the bottom of the bench.

Now, if Noah was doing that today as a 16-year-old, we'd be concerned. But this isn't surprising behavior or logic for a toddler. And as parents, it wouldn't make much sense for us to get angry with Noah the toddler or punish them for doing this. It is simply a child growing up, learning, and being who they are at the different developmental stages of their journey. It takes time for us to grow and learn, to discern what is wise and what isn't (and to know which gum is okay for eating and which isn't ☺).

As I look at the book of Proverbs that I'll reflect on today, I think of this journey of growth and learning that each of us is in over the course of our lives. Hopefully we had or have parents who graciously and patiently taught us about life in this world but even with the best parents, we, children, do not become wise overnight. It is a process of formation, a journey of not only learning knowledge, but also wisdom to know when and how to apply the knowledge we gain. And we all make plenty of mistakes in the journey!

And so I think this picture of a child learning and growing and having parents help guide them in this journey is an apt one as we look at Proverbs. The first chapters of this book are even organized and written in such a way as to make us, as the audience, feel sort of like we're listening to a wise parent instructing their child on their journey. And this parent is encouraging their child to choose the path of wisdom, to orient themselves and incline their ears and hearts toward wisdom (Prov. 2:1-2, TIB).

The book begins:

"The proverbs of Solomon, King David's son, from Israel: Their purpose is to teach wisdom and discipline, to help one understand wise sayings. They provide insightful instruction, which is righteous, just, and full of integrity. They make the naive mature, the young knowledgeable and discreet. The wise hear them and grow in wisdom; those with understanding gain guidance. They help one understand proverbs and difficult sayings, the words of the wise, and their puzzles. When you stand in awe of YHWH—that is when you begin to really understand. But to spurn wisdom and instruction is utter foolishness." (1:1-6 CEB and 1:7 TIB)

Notice that last verse that speaks about awe of God as wisdom. We'll see this idea come up again in 9:10, **"Reverence for YHWH is the beginning of wisdom; and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."** This is an important idea in the book of Proverbs: Remain humble, grow in awe or reverence of God, the Great Mystery. This is how wisdom grows according to Proverbs.

And from here the lessons from the parents to their children begin and time and again the children are admonished to orient themselves toward wisdom.

2:1-6: "My children, accept my words and store up my commands. Turn your ear toward wisdom, and stretch your mind toward understanding. Call out for insight, and cry aloud for understanding. Seek it like silver; search for it like hidden treasure. Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and discover the knowledge of God. For God alone gives wisdom; from God's mouth come knowledge and understanding."

I notice the verbs here of ‘turn your ear,’ ‘stretch your mind,’ ‘seek,’ ‘search.’ These speak to me of a *journey* of growth. Continually growing more and more in wisdom. We see this idea in 4:1, 5-6 as well which says, **“Listen, my children, to a parent’s lesson; listen closely, and gain insight....Grow in discernment! Grow in wisdom! Don’t you give up on her, and she will never give up on you”**. It’s a process, it doesn’t happen all at once but is something you keep seeking and keep growing in.

And in the midst of these lessons and admonishments from the wise parent we see Wisdom and Foolishness personified and presented as calling people to follow them.

“Doesn’t Wisdom call? Doesn’t Understanding raise her voice? On the hills along the road, at the crossroads, she takes her stand; beside the city gates of the town, in the gates themselves, she cries out,....my daughters and sons, hear me well: happy are you when you keep my ways! Take my instruction seriously and grow wise; don’t neglect my lessons.” (8:1-3, 32-33, TIB).

The children, and by extension us, are presented with this choice between following the way of wisdom or the way of foolishness, orienting ourselves toward wisdom or toward folly. What will our choice be? What kind of people do we want to be formed into?

Then, beginning in chapter 10 we get collections of proverbs, short sayings meant for listeners to sit with, chew on, and learn what it means to be oriented to wisdom, to choose wisdom over folly. My OT professor, Eric Ortlund, described these proverbs as ‘**brief, and un-nuanced**’ (Ortlund, p. 8). They are designed to be short and memorable but as such, any one proverb is not going to take into account all the nuance of a given idea. In other words, they are helpful and wise but aren’t the whole story.

And so I think an important part of wisdom is learning *when* certain knowledge applies and when it may not. And if it does apply, *how* to apply that wisdom. A given proverb may speak to one situation and not another. Or it may be best applied in different ways in different circumstances. And becoming a wise person is learning this skill of when and how to apply knowledge.

A great example of this from Proverbs comes in chapter 26. In verses 4-5, back-to-back, we read: **“Don’t answer fools according to their folly, or you will become like them yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will deem themselves wise.”** Back-to-back proverbs telling us the opposite: *Don’t* answer fools...*answer* fools. Both cannot be universally true for all circumstances. So in this case, learning wisdom is about learning when it may be beneficial to respond to someone’s foolishness and when it may not be, when to confront and when not to. The person heeding the wisdom of these words must rely on their formation in choosing how to respond in a given situation.

And I think part of the importance of this approach, and I might even say part of what the presence of the book of Proverbs in scripture can teach us, is it acknowledges the impossibility of there being a proverb or rule or command for every possible situation across every context throughout time. That we cannot expect the Bible to answer every specific question we have or tell us what to do in every specific situation so that all we have to do is memorize the rules and the verses and we’ll always know what to do. Instead, I think Proverbs can communicate to us that walking with God is a journey, where we gradually, step-by-step, learn more about who God is, what it means to be shaped by God, what it means to orient our hearts toward divine wisdom, and learn more and more how to respond wisely in given situations.

And so part of the brilliance in how the beginning of Proverbs is set up, with it appearing as a wise parent instructing their child, is that this picture of a child growing up encapsulates beautifully the journey of faith and walking with God I think. A child doesn't come out of the womb knowing everything they need to know, able to do everything they'll need to do. It is a life-long, gradual process of learning, changing, growing, adapting. And the journey of faith is similar. A life-long process of learning who God is, adapting our understanding when circumstances necessitate it, growing, changing.

And I think an argument can be made that this is perhaps part of the intention and function of *ALL* of Scripture: not to function as a sort of timeless rulebook or instruction manual that teaches us what to say and do in every circumstance regardless of context, but as a library of peoples' experiences of God and how they learned to walk with God in their context, which we can then use to learn how to walk with God in our context. I've appreciated the wisdom of Pete Enns and Jared Byas in this regard and in a presentation, Byas argued that approaching all of Scripture as a Wisdom Book of sorts leads us to focus not on following rules as much as on learning how to become wise followers of the Christ, how to be formed into 'Christ-shaped' people who can apply the wisdom of God in different ways in different circumstances.

Another way I've thought of it is the difference between a fill-in-the-blank question on a test versus an essay question. There is only one correct response in a fill-in-the-blank question but an essay question will be answered differently by every student based on their formation through the class and their lives. Life seldom comes at us in the form of a fill-in-the-blank test so that we can just use the Bible to memorize the right answer for every situation we find ourselves in. Rather, it comes at us more like an essay question where we have to consider possibilities and discern the best way that we want to approach a given situation.

So I've spoken to how Proverbs initially presents itself as a wise parent instructing their child in wise living, encouraging them to orient themselves toward the path of wisdom. And then how the short proverbs beginning in chapter 10 are not designed to tell *all* people across *all* time what exactly to do in *every* given circumstance, but to help form us into wisdom-oriented people who can grow in our ability to skillfully apply wisdom in different circumstances.

So what is my point in this overview and examination? What am I trying to communicate?...I wish I knew ☺. No, as I've been looking at these Wisdom Books in the Bible I've also been asking the question of how can these books help us live with hope, peace, and joy in a broken world? And some of what I've gleaned from Proverbs includes a sense of freedom to embrace and enjoy the journey of life and of faith. To be patient and gracious with myself. To remain humble and open to learning and growing and changing when necessary. I again quote my OT professor when he says, **"Proverbs will repeatedly tell us that one major characteristic of the wise is simply being willing to listen, and the fools simply refuse to do so."** (Ortlund, p. 10). The way of wisdom includes humility and a willingness to listen.

And I think of the parent-child image again. I think a good parent doesn't expect their child to know everything or be perfect right from the get-go. There is a patience necessary in parenting, an understanding that the journey of a child will take time. That their formation will take place over the course of their lifetime and that learning is a life-long journey. And that love and acceptance is not dependent on perfection in any given moment.

Perhaps it can be helpful to view the journey of faith in the same way. To view God as a good parent who does not have expectation of our instant perfection but who is a patient and loving and gracious Guide for the journey. And perhaps this means we can feel less pressure to have everything figured out at any given time. Perhaps we can embrace that grace for ourselves and enjoy the process, enjoy the journey as we grow more and more into a person shaped by wisdom and faith and love and hope.

Rev. Tonetta Landis-Aina speaks about the language in Psalms and Proverbs highlighting spiritual formation and they say: **“I love the language in the wisdom literature especially the Psalms and Proverbs about people of wisdom walking down a path, so it’s not a line you cross but it’s a process you’re invited into.”** [Sexuality & Spirituality — Q Christian Fellowship](#)

It’s not a line you cross as if one day I’m foolish and the next I’m wise. Or one day I know nothing and the next I know it all. Or one day I’m faithless and the next I’m faithful. It’s not a line you cross but it’s a process we’re invited into. It’s a path we gradually walk down. Orienting ourselves toward wisdom and growing in our ability to live skillfully and wisely. And when we choose foolishness, as we all do at times, knowing that God is a gracious, forgiving, parent walking alongside of us, delighting in us throughout the journey.

I want to end our time by reading a favorite couple verses from Proverbs found in 8:30-31 where personified wisdom speaks and I think can give us insight into the heart of God toward us:

“I [Wisdom] was beside [God] as a master of crafts. I was having fun, smiling before [God] all the time, frolicking with [their] inhabited earth and delighting in the human race.” (CEB)

I love this image of Wisdom, of God, as having fun, smiling, delighting in us as a good parent delights in their children. Taking pleasure in their child’s joy and growth. So as we sit with the book of Proverbs and what it can teach us, as we orient ourselves toward wisdom and toward God, may we sense the presence of God inviting us on the journey, embracing us as we learn and develop and grow, delighting in us every step of the way as a gracious and loving parent.

Benediction: May we be humble, wisdom-oriented, love-centered and Christ-formed people, walking the path with our gracious and delighting Parent God, growing in wisdom as we walk.

Resources

Byas, Jared. The Bible is Not a Rulebook. The Bible for Normal People. [The Bible is Not a Rulebook — The Bible for Normal People](#)

Landis-Aina, Tonetta. [Sexuality & Spirituality — Q Christian Fellowship](#)

Ortlund, Eric. Class Notes: BT 615 Old Testament Wisdom Literature: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes.