

Get Wisdom, Choose Wisdom, Guard Wisdom

Proverbs 4:1–27

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An Archaeological Moment

Three great roads ran through ancient Israel. The first was the Way of the Sea — the *Via Maris* — the ancient coastal highway that connected Egypt to Mesopotamia and carried the armies, merchants, and diplomats of the ancient world. The second was the King’s Highway, *derech ha-melekh*, running along the Transjordanian plateau east of the Jordan. The third was the Way of the Patriarchs, *derech ha-avot*, the central ridge road through the hill country of Canaan — the road Abraham walked, the road the tribes settled, the road that connected the highlands of Israel from north to south.

What these three roads share is this: they are ancient, well-worn, and deliberate. They did not happen by accident. They were paths that generations of travelers chose and kept choosing, until the choosing itself wore them into the landscape. Proverbs 4 is about exactly that kind of road. It is about the paths that wisdom and folly cut through a human life — and about the choosing that determines which one a man walks.

A Brief Review of Proverbs 1–3

Before we enter chapter 4, it helps to remember the ground we have already covered.

Proverbs 1 introduced us to three voices: the parents, who teach; the sinners, who entice; and Wisdom herself, who cries aloud in the street. The lesson was stark — those who refuse Wisdom will eat the fruit of their refusal, and those who listen will dwell secure.

Proverbs 2 showed us that Wisdom must be sought. The chapter laid out its rewards in full: knowledge of God Himself (vv. 5–8), moral discernment for daily life (v. 9), internal transformation and protection (vv. 10–11), deliverance from the two great destroyers (vv. 12–19), and covenant security and endurance (vv. 20–22). Wisdom is not for the passive. She rewards the one who digs for her.

Proverbs 3 showed us that Wisdom must be lived — inward toward the self, upward toward God, and outward toward the neighbor — and the chapter closed with a final binary: two persons, two houses, two attitudes, two rewards.

And now Proverbs 4. The progression has been deliberate: Wisdom is offered (chapter 1), Wisdom is sought (chapter 2), Wisdom is lived (chapter 3). Tonight the focus shifts again. Chapter 4 is about Wisdom inherited — and once received, guarded.

The chapter moves in three distinct sections, each opened by a fresh address from the father.

Verses 1–9: *Hear, O sons* — Wisdom Inherited. A father remembers his own father.

Verses 10–19: *Hear, my son* — Wisdom Walked. The two paths, and the two lightings.

Verses 20–27: *My son, be attentive* — Wisdom Guarded. The heart, and the four gates of the body.

Let us read.

Get Wisdom: Wisdom Inherited (vv. 1–9)

| *Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight.*

The chapter opens not with *my son* but with *O sons* — plural. The father is teaching not one boy but several. He is teaching a household. He is teaching a generation.

Hear — *shema*. The great covenant verb. To hear and to do. The first word of Deuteronomy 6. The first word of the wise life.

Instruction — *musar*. There it is again, the familiar word from 1:2, 1:7, 1:8, and 3:11. Formative correction. The shaping of character. Solomon will not let his sons forget what their grandfather taught him.

Attentive — from *qashav*. The pricked-up ear. The ear that leans toward the sound. The father has been calling for this same posture since chapter 1. He has not changed his method.

| *For I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching.*

Good precepts — *leqach tov*. The good taking-in. The same root as the *learning* of 1:5 and the *receive* of 2:1. What I give you is good. Take it. Do not forsake it.

And then the most arresting verses of the section:

When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live."

Here we see something we have not seen yet in the book. Solomon, the teacher, becomes a son. He pulls back the curtain on his own childhood.

When I was a son with my father — and the father is David. *Tender* — *rakh*, soft, young, impressionable. *The only one in the sight of my mother* — Bathsheba, who was no insignificant figure in Solomon's life. First Kings 1 shows her stepping into the palace to secure his throne. Solomon was her precious one.

And David taught him. *Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.*

Three generations are now in view: the grandfather David, who taught his son; the father Solomon, who is now teaching his sons; and the sons themselves, who are being taught. Behind all three stands the wisdom itself, passed down through the generations like a family inheritance.

This is how wisdom is meant to travel through the world — not by accident, not by genius, not by self-discovery, but through fathers and mothers, generation by generation, in the home. The Old Testament does not assume that wisdom will spontaneously generate in every generation. It assumes that wisdom will be handed on. The *Shema* — *teach them diligently to your children* (Deut. 6:7). The Passover instruction — *when your son asks you, you shall say to him* (Ex. 12:26). Psalm 78 — *what we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us, we will not hide from their children, but tell to the coming generation* (Ps. 78:3–4). A generation that does not teach wisdom is a generation that ends wisdom.

There is a pastoral comfort here too. Solomon was tender once. Solomon was a small boy with a father and a mother. The greatest teacher of wisdom in the Old Testament was once a boy who had to be taught. No one starts wise. Wisdom is given.

Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you.

Six imperatives in two verses. Listen to the verbs: *get, get, do not forget, do not turn away, do not forsake, love*. The pace quickens. The voice rises. This is a father who knows exactly what is at stake.

Get — *qanah*. To acquire, to buy, to take possession of. The same verb used of God acquiring His people in Exodus 15:16. The same verb used of acquiring a wife (Ruth 4:10). It is a strong, decisive, possessive word. Make wisdom yours. Do not borrow her. Do not visit her. Get her.

And two verses on, the father hammers the verb again:

| *The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.*

Three more imperatives. *Get. Get. Get.* The Hebrew is even more striking — *reshit chokmah qeneh chokmah, uvkol-qinyanekha qeneh vinah*. The word for *get* and the word for *what you possess* share the same root. Whatever you are acquiring — your house, your career, your reputation, your portfolio, your influence — with all of that getting, get wisdom. Do not let the getting of lesser things substitute for the getting of the one thing.

The man who has acquired everything but wisdom has acquired nothing. The man who has acquired wisdom has acquired everything.

And then the language softens — and turns relational.

| *Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.*

Prize her highly — *salsel*, to lift up, to esteem, to raise to her right place in your life. *Embrace* — *chabaq*, to clasp, to hold close. The word used of Jacob embracing his long-lost son Joseph (Gen. 48:10). The father is using marriage language. Wisdom is not a textbook the son consults. Wisdom is a bride the son weds.

And then the crowning. *She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.* The image echoes 1:9, but now the one doing the crowning is Wisdom herself, and the crown is *atarah* — a wedding crown. Song of Solomon 3:11 — *Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.* The young man who embraces wisdom is, in Solomon's image, a groom on his wedding day. Wisdom puts the wreath on his head. He is exalted. He is honored. He is crowned.

The world tells the young man that the way of wisdom is the way of drabness — long beards, narrow corridors, restricted joys. Solomon answers: the way of wisdom is the way of a wedding crown. It is the way of glory.

Choose Wisdom: Wisdom Walked (vv. 10–19)

A father can show his son the way. He cannot make him walk it. And so the chapter now turns from receiving to choosing — and there are only two paths to choose from.

| *Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many.*

The second movement opens. *Hear, my son*. The audience tightens — from *O sons* (v. 1) back to *my son* (v. 10). The address is now intimate.

Accept — *qach*. Take. The same root everywhere — *leqach* (1:5), *tiqqach* (2:1). The wise son receives. He does not stand at a distance and consider. He takes.

That the years of your life may be many. The first promise of this section — and not a new one. We have already heard it: *length of days and years of life* (3:2). The way of wisdom is the way that goes on. The way of folly is the way that ends.

| *I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness.*

The father claims his work. *I have taught*. *I have led*. Notice those verbs. *Taught* — *horeitikha*, from *yarah*, the very verb behind the noun *torah*. I have *torah*-ed you. The teaching has been instruction, not entertainment. *Led* — *hidraketikha*, from *darakh*, to tread, to walk. I have walked you in these paths. This is not theoretical instruction. The father has gone in front. The son has been walked along the road.

This is the deeper truth about how wisdom is taught. A father does not give his son a manual on walking. He walks ahead and the son follows. Wisdom is not learned from a chair. Wisdom is learned at the heels of someone older.

| *When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble.*

The son who has been walked in wisdom's paths can now walk — and can now run — without falling. Not because the path is paved, but because his foot has been trained. Think of a hill-country boy whose father has walked him over a thousand miles of stony track. The boy has learned where the rocks are, where the ground gives way. His feet have eyes. He can run.

| *Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.*

Keep hold — *hachazaq*. To grasp tightly, to seize. The verb used when a man takes a sword in his hand. Grip wisdom like a sword. *Do not let go* — *al-terref*. Do not loosen. Do not slacken. *Guard* — *natser*, the watchman's verb, the same one from 2:8. Three commands, all about not losing what you have.

The chapter has just commanded the son to get wisdom. Now it commands him not to lose her. This is the great Christian danger — not failure to begin, but failure to continue. The young man who gets wisdom and then lets go is no better than the man who never got her. Hebrews

2:1 — *We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.* Drifting is the great sin against wisdom. Hold on.

And now the contrast — the other road.

Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on.

Five negative imperatives in two verses. *Do not enter. Do not walk. Avoid. Do not go. Turn away.* The father is not subtle. He is shouting. There is no language here of cautiously approaching the path of the wicked to see what it might offer, no language of dipping a toe in. The father's counsel is direct: stay off the road altogether. If you find yourself on it, get off. Turn away. Pass on.

Wisdom is not merely doing the right thing. It is also not doing the wrong thing.

For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble. For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

Here is a glimpse inside the wicked — and it is not a comfortable one. They are driven. This is the inversion of Proverbs 3:24 — *If you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.* The wise man sleeps. The wicked man cannot. Evil itself becomes his bread, his wine, his food, his rest. He is consumed by what was supposed to be consumed by him. Sin is not a hobby for the wicked. It is a hunger. The more he eats, the hungrier he gets.

But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.

And here, the great image. Two paths. Two lightings.

The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn — *or nogah*, the light that breaks. The first gray of morning, then the rose, then the gold, then the full sun. The path of the righteous gets clearer as he walks. The longer he walks, the more he can see. The Hebrew is even more evocative: *holekh va-or, ad-nekhon hayyom* — going and brightening, until the day is established. The verb is present and progressive. He is going. The light is brightening. The whole verse is in motion.

This is one of the most pastorally important verses in Proverbs. The wise life is not a life full of light from the beginning. It is a life that gets lighter. The young believer who is anxious because he cannot yet see the whole road should hear this verse and breathe. The light is dawn light. It grows.

And the wicked? *The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.* No dawn. No brightening. He stumbles, and he does not even know what he stumbled on. He cannot diagnose his own falls. The darkness has not lifted because he has not turned toward the light.

There is a deep theological claim here. Light, in Scripture, is a moral category before it is a physical one. The man who walks with God walks in increasing light. The man who walks away from God walks in deepening dark. And the difference is not external. The difference is which way the man is facing.

Guard Wisdom: Wisdom Guarded (vv. 20–27)

| *My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart.*

The third movement opens. Same address — *my son*. Same posture — *be attentive, incline your ear*, both echoing 2:2. But now the focus turns inward. The father is going to take his son through his own body and command him to guard it, part by part.

Let them not escape from your sight — literally, *al-yalizu me'einekha*, do not let them slip away from your eyes. *Keep them within your heart* — *shomrem betokh levaveka*. The watchman's verb again. Watch them inside your heart.

| *For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh.*

The same pairing from 3:8 — wisdom is medicine. The whole body benefits when the heart attends to wisdom.

And now the great central command of the chapter:

| *Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.*

This may be the most famous verse in Proverbs, and rightly so.

Keep — *natsor*, the watchman's verb. *With all vigilance* — *mikol-mishmar*, literally *above every watch-post*. Of all the things you might guard — your money, your reputation, your house, your name — guard your heart above all of them. The heart is the chief watch-post. Place the chief sentry there.

For from it flow the springs of life — *ki-mimennu tots'a'ot chayyim*. Out of it, the outgoings of life. The heart is the spring. Everything else in a man's life flows out from there — his words,

his decisions, his loves, his hates, his habits. The biblical anthropology is unmistakable. The heart is not merely the seat of feeling. It is the seat of the whole interior life: mind, will, affection — all of it, in Hebrew, living in *lev*. It is the central control. It is the headwaters.

Jesus picks this up exactly. *Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander* (Matt. 15:19). And again — *out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks* (Matt. 12:34). The Lord Jesus understood Proverbs 4:23. He knew that the heart is the headwaters. If the headwaters are clean, the river is clean. If the headwaters are foul, no amount of cleaning the river downstream will fix it.

This is why the gospel goes to the heart and not just to the behavior. You cannot reform a man by reforming his outputs. You must reform him at the spring. Ezekiel 36 — *I will give you a new heart... I will put a new spirit within you*. Jeremiah 31 — *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts*. The new covenant is heart surgery. Anything less is too shallow to save.

And now, having commanded the central guard, Solomon takes us through the four members that the heart governs — the four gates.

| *Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you.*

The first gate is the mouth. What forms in the heart comes out through the mouth.

Crooked speech — *iqqeshut peh*, twistedness of mouth. The mouth that says one thing while the heart means another. *Devious talk* — *lezut sefatayim*, slipperiness of lips. The lips that talk around the truth, that suggest without saying, that imply without committing. *Put it away. Put it far away*. Two verbs of removal. The wise man patrols his own mouth. He listens to what he is about to say before he says it, and if it is crooked, he stops it before it leaves the gate. James 3 — *the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!* James was reading Proverbs 4:24.

| *Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.*

The second gate is the eyes. What forms in the heart goes out through the eyes — and the eyes are also the gate through which the world enters and shapes the heart.

Look directly forward — *lenokhakh yabbitu*, let them gaze straight ahead. *Gaze be straight before you* — *yaisheru negdekha*, let them be level, fixed in front of you. The wise man's eyes do not wander. They do not drift sideways toward the forbidden. They are fixed forward, on the path.

The Lord Jesus — *the eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness* (Matt. 6:22–23). What enters through the eye fills the body. In our own day this verse strikes with

peculiar force. Never in human history have a man's eyes been more solicited. Every screen, every street, every advertisement pulls the gaze sideways. Solomon says: keep your eyes forward. Walk the path. Do not look at what will pull you off it.

| *Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.*

The third gate is the mind. The heart cannot govern the body without thought in between, and Solomon is not yet talking about the foot. He is talking about what the mind does before the foot moves.

Ponder — *palles*, to weigh, to make level, to consider carefully. The weigher's verb. The same root as a balance scale. The merchant who sets one weight against another, watching for the balance to settle, is *pallessing*. Solomon takes that mercantile image and turns it inward. The mind weighs the path before the foot takes it. *All your ways will be sure* — *yikkonu kol-de-rakheikha*, all your ways will be established, will stand firm. Notice the order: the mind weighs, and then the ways are sure. The weighing is what produces the sureness. Without the weighing, the ways are guesswork.

The wise man does not think with his feet. He thinks before his feet. He examines the path before he steps on it. He asks where the road leads. He does not assume that because a path is well-worn it is the right path — many feet have worn the way to ruin. This verse, in particular, would correct our moment. We are a generation that moves first and thinks later, that steps before it weighs. Solomon says: weigh before you step. Set the road on the scale. Examine it. And only then — walk.

| *Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.*

The fourth gate is the feet. The mind has weighed; now the foot must walk. This is where wisdom finally hits the ground. A man may guard his speech and his sight and his thought — but if his feet still wander, the path is lost.

The Shape of the Chapter

Stand back and look at what Solomon has done.

Verses 1–9: Wisdom inherited. A father remembers his own father and hands wisdom on.

Verses 10–19: Wisdom walked. Two paths, two lightings, two ends.

Verses 20–27: Wisdom guarded. The heart, and through the heart, the four gates of the body — the mouth, the eyes, the mind, and the feet.

The chapter has moved steadily inward across three movements. First, outside the son — in his father and grandfather, and the wisdom they passed on. Second, under the son — in the path he walks, and the two possible lightings. Third, inside the son — in the heart that governs the whole body, and in the four gates through which the heart engages the world.

Three things to take with you from Proverbs 4.

Get wisdom. Spend everything you have on her. Whatever you get, get insight. No house, no honor, no profit is worth her absence. She is the one acquisition that, once made, justifies the cost of every other.

Walk wisdom. Take her out of the head and put her on the road. The father's word was not theoretical: *I have led you in the paths of uprightness.* Wisdom that does not walk is not wisdom. And as you walk — slow at first, dim at first — you will discover that the path itself becomes brighter under your feet. *The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn.*

Guard wisdom. Place the chief watchman at the heart, for from it flow the springs of life. And watch the four gates the heart controls — what comes out of the mouth, what enters through the eyes, what the mind weighs before it acts, and where the feet finally walk. The wise man patrols his own borders.