

Wisdom Lived

Proverbs 3:1–35

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Archaeological Moment: The Threshing Floor and the Firstfruits

In our passage tonight, Solomon will say in verse 9: “*Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.*” That verse is our entry point tonight — and to hear it the way Solomon’s first hearers heard it, we need to go to the threshing floor.

In the world of ancient Israel, grain did not go straight from the field to the table. There was a place in between. It was called the *goren* — the threshing floor — and every village had one.

Archaeologists have found these floors throughout the land. They are usually on hilltops or on exposed ridges, often just outside the village. They are circular — typically fifteen to thirty feet across. The floor itself is either bedrock that has been smoothed flat or packed earth that has been leveled and beaten hard. Around the edge, sometimes, you can still see post holes where stakes were driven to tether the threshing animals.

Why on a hilltop? Because of the wind. The threshing floor was where the harvest was processed — sheaves laid out in the sun, oxen or wooden sledges with embedded stones driven over them to break the kernels free from the chaff. And then came the winnowing: the worker took a wooden fork and threw the broken pile up into the air. The grain, being heavy, fell back to the floor. The chaff, being light, was carried off by the wind. No wind, no winnowing.

The threshing floor was an exposed place. A public place. It was where Boaz lay down to sleep beside his pile of barley, and Ruth came to him in the night (Ruth 3). It was where Araunah the Jebusite was threshing his wheat when David came to buy his floor for fifty shekels of silver — and that floor became the site of Solomon’s temple (2 Sam. 24:24; 2 Chr. 3:1). The threshing floor was where Israel’s grain was made ready for use — and it was where Israel’s first temple was built. There is something deep in that.

John the Baptist heard that depth too. When he described the coming Messiah, he reached for the image of the threshing floor:

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
(Matthew 3:12)

Here is the connection to our text. Once the grain had been threshed and winnowed, the first portion — the *reshit* — was set aside. Not the leftover. Not what was easy to spare. The first. It was placed in a basket, carried to the sanctuary, and given to the LORD. Deuteronomy 26 describes the ceremony in detail. The Israelite stood before the priest with his basket and recited the credo: *A wandering Aramean was my father...* He confessed where the grain came from. He confessed Whose it was.

Hear verse 9 with that picture in your mind. The Israelite who honored the LORD with his firstfruits was not paying a tax. He was making a confession. He was saying, with his hands full of grain, that the harvest was not his own. He had threshed it. He had winnowed it. But he had not made it grow. The LORD had. And the first portion belonged to the One who gave it.

Solomon’s hearers knew exactly what *reshit* meant. They had stood on the threshing floor. They had filled the basket. The grain in their hands was the LORD’s first.

Review: Proverbs 1 and 2

Before we enter chapter 3, it is worth pausing to remember where we have been.

Proverbs 1 set three voices before us: the parents, who teach; the sinners, who entice; and Wisdom herself, who cries aloud in the street. The chapter ended with a clean binary. Those who refuse Wisdom will eat the fruit of their refusal. Those who listen will dwell securely.

Proverbs 2 showed us that wisdom must be sought. The benefits of that search unfold in layers: first, knowledge of God Himself (vv. 5–8); then moral discernment for daily life (v. 9); then internal transformation and protection (vv. 10–11); then deliverance from the two great destroyers (vv. 12–19); and finally, covenant security and endurance (vv. 20–22).

Now, in chapter 3, we arrive at the next movement: wisdom must not only be sought — it must be *lived*. The chapter is addressed to the son three times, and each address opens a new dimension of the wise life. Verses 1–10 concern wisdom lived inward, toward the self. Verses 11–20 concern wisdom lived upward, toward God. Verses 21–31 concern wisdom lived outward, toward the neighbor. And verses 32–35 close with the two great contrasts — two persons, two houses, two attitudes, two rewards.

Wisdom Lived Inward: Verses 1–10

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. (vv. 1–2)

We are back to the familiar voice. *My son* — the same address as 1:8 and 2:1. The father speaks again. The home is still the place where wisdom is given.

Look at the verbs. *Forget* — *tishkach* — to lose from memory, to let slip. The father does not say *do not disagree with my teaching*. He says *do not forget it*. The danger is not rejection. The danger is drift. A man does not have to renounce wisdom to lose it. He only has to stop remembering it.

My teaching — *torati* — torah. The same word the mother's teaching was called in 1:8. The father now claims the word too. This is not informal advice. It is covenantal instruction. And the son is told to *keep it* — *yitsor* — to guard it, to watch over it, to preserve it. The same verb used of God's own keeping in 2:8. The heart keeps the commandments the way a watchman keeps a city. The teaching is not stored in a book. It is stored in the heart. The mind remembers; the heart keeps.

The first promise follows: length of days, years of life, and peace. Three gifts, and all of them are gifts the world cannot give. The world can offer a long life of misery. The world can offer crowded years that are not actually living. The world cannot offer *shalom*. *Shalom* is not the absence of trouble. *Shalom* is the presence of right ordering — wholeness, completeness, settled welfare — and it comes from the LORD, through the keeping of His commandments. The wise man's life is not just longer; it is more alive.

Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man. (vv. 3–4)

Now a great covenantal pair appears. *Steadfast love* — *chesed* — covenant loyalty, the love that does not let go, the word used over and over of the LORD's love for His people. *Faithfulness* — *emet* — truth, reliability, what is real, what holds up, what does not fail.

Chesed and *emet*. These two words appear together throughout the Old Testament because they belong together. In Exodus 34, when the LORD passes before Moses and proclaims His name, He declares Himself *abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*. Love without faithfulness is sentiment. Faithfulness without love is mere duty. Together, they are covenant.

And the son is told to wear them. To bind them around the neck — like the pendants of 1:9. To write them on the tablet of the heart — language Jeremiah will later use of the new covenant itself. The *chesed* and *emet* of God are to become the *chesed* and *emet* of the son's own life. He

is to be loyal. He is to be true. The covenant character of God is to become the covenant character of the man.

The result: *favor* — *chen*, grace, the regard of one who looks on you with goodwill — and *good success*, literally *good understanding*, the kind of intelligence that actually works, that produces the right outcome. Notice the phrase: *in the sight of God and man*. This is the same Hebrew construction used of the boy Samuel — *the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man* (1 Sam. 2:26). It is the same construction Luke will use of the boy Jesus — *Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man* (Luke 2:52). The wise life is not a divided life. It is integrated. The man whom God approves is, in time, the man whom others recognize.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (vv. 5–6)

And now we come to perhaps the most quoted verse in the book.

Trust — *betach* — to lean on, to be confident in, to rely fully. The word is used of leaning against a wall, putting your weight down on something. It is the verb of body weight. And it is intensified: *with all your heart* — *bekol-libbekha*. Not most of it. Not the religious portion. All.

Do not lean — *al-tisha'en* — the same image, but negated. Do not put your weight down on this other thing. Your *own understanding* — your *binah*, your discernment, the faculty by which a man figures things out.

Hear what this verse is saying. It is not saying *do not think*. The whole book of Proverbs is a call to think. It is saying *do not put the weight of your life down on your own thinking*. Your understanding is real. Your understanding is given by God. But your understanding is not the foundation. The LORD is the foundation. Your understanding is the lamp; He is the ground.

This is one of the hardest verses in Proverbs to live. We are formed in a culture that says trust your gut, follow your heart, lean on your own understanding. Solomon says no — not because the heart is worthless, but because the heart is too small to hold the weight of a life. Only the LORD is large enough for that.

Acknowledge him — *da'ehu* — from *yada*, the verb of relational knowing that ran through the early verses of chapter 2. Know Him in all your ways. Not consult Him on the religious questions. Know Him in everything. And the promise: *he will make straight your paths* — *yashar*, to level the road, to clear it of obstacles. The bumps smoothed. The rocks removed. The crooked places straightened. The man who knows God in all his ways finds that the LORD does the road work.

Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. (vv. 7–8)

Verse 7 gathers and restates verses 5–6. The man who is wise in his own eyes has rested the weight on the wrong place. The correction is twofold: fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. The fear of the LORD that was the beginning of knowledge in 1:7 and the goal of the search in 2:5 is now the daily disposition of the wise — and it is not abstract. It produces a footstep. A turning.

And the body itself benefits. *Healing* — *riph'ut* — from *rapha*, the verb of medical healing, the word God used of Himself in Exodus 15: *I am the LORD, your healer*. Refreshment to the bones — moisture poured on the deepest structure of the body. Solomon makes a claim the modern world is only beginning to recover. The way a man relates to God affects his body. The man who lives by trust is not eaten by anxiety the way the man who leans on his own understanding is. The man who turns from evil is not corroded by guilt the way the man who runs into evil is. The body knows what the soul is doing. Wisdom is medicine.

Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. (vv. 9–10)

And here is the verse that brought us to the threshing floor.

Honor — *kabbed* — from *kavod*, weight, glory. To honor is to give weight to, to treat as heavy, to acknowledge as significant. And notice what is to be honored with: not the surplus, not what is left over after expenses — the *firstfruits*. The *reshit*. The first. The Israelite who carried his basket to the temple did so before the rest of the harvest had even been brought in. He did not wait to see how the season turned out. He took the first of the crop, gave it to the LORD, and trusted the LORD for the rest.

This is the act of trust from verse 5 in concrete economic form. To honor the LORD with your firstfruits is to put the weight of your livelihood down on Him — to say, with your wallet open, that you trust Him.

Now hear me carefully. Solomon is not preaching the prosperity gospel. He is not promising that every faithful giver will become wealthy. The book of Proverbs as a whole, and the rest of Scripture especially, will not let us read it that way. Solomon himself, in chapter 30, will pray for neither poverty nor riches. Job will be a faithful man stripped of everything. The cross will be the climax of all wisdom and the end of an earthly fortune.

But Solomon is making a real claim. The man who honors the LORD with the first of his produce is the man whose life is ordered rightly under God — and a life ordered rightly under God is, generally and over time, a life that flourishes. Not always in the form of overflowing

barns. Sometimes in the form of quiet shalom. The principle stands: you cannot out-give the LORD. The man who tries discovers that the LORD is generous beyond his giving.

Wisdom Lived Upward: Verses 11–20

My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights. (vv. 11–12)

The second *my son* begins a new section, and the topic shifts from gain to pain.

Despise — *ma'as* — to reject, to spurn, to treat as worthless. *Be weary* — *al-taqots* — to loathe, to feel disgust at. Discipline is hard, and the son's natural reaction is to hate it. Solomon does not pretend otherwise. He simply names both reactions and then warns against them.

Discipline — *musar*. There it is, the familiar word from 1:2, 1:7, 1:8. Musar has been present from the beginning of the book. Now we learn its source. The musar the son receives is, in the end, the LORD's musar. The mother and father correct because the LORD corrects. They are not the source. They are the means.

And here is the deepest reframe of pain in the book of Proverbs: the LORD's reproof is not wrath. It is love. He reproves the way a father reproves a son in whom he *delights* — a father whose discipline is rooted in pleasure, not contempt. This verse is so important that the New Testament quotes it directly. Hebrews 12:5–6 picks it up: *My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord... For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives.* And the writer of Hebrews draws the conclusion: if you are not being disciplined, you should worry. Sons are disciplined. The man who is left alone is not the man God loves; he is the man God has given over.

There is a hard pastoral comfort here. When the LORD's hand falls on you in correction — when life is hard, when sin is exposed, when the path is blocked — that is not a sign that He has stopped loving you. That is the sign that He has *not* stopped loving you. He is treating you as a son. Do not despise it. Do not weary of it. The discipline is the love.

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. (vv. 13–15)

And now the great wisdom poem of the chapter.

Blessed — *ashre* — happy, fortunate, the man whose life is going well. The same word that opens Psalm 1. And there is the verb again: *finds* — *matsa* — the same *matsa* that ran through chapter 2. The man who sought has found. The wisdom that was sought like silver, that was given by God — when found, it makes the finder blessed.

The economic comparison that follows presses the silver image of chapter 2 further. Yes, you should seek wisdom like silver. But what you find is worth more than silver itself. The silver was the metaphor; the wisdom is the reality. And the reality outweighs not only silver and gold but the most prized of valuables — *peninim*, precious stones, perhaps coral or pearl. Nothing you can name. Nothing you can want. Wisdom is worth more.

Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed. (vv. 16–18)

Wisdom is now personified, holding gifts in both hands: long life in the right, riches and honor in the left. And the path she walks is *no'am* — pleasantness, sweetness, beauty, the word used of God Himself in Psalm 27 — and *shalom*, which verse 2 already promised and which now pervades the path itself.

The world tells the young man that the way of God is restrictive, narrow, drab. Solomon answers: her ways are pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

And then the image of the tree of life. We have not seen this image since Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve were driven from the garden and the way to the tree of life was guarded by cherubim and a flaming sword. The tree was lost. Access to life was shut.

Solomon now says: wisdom is a tree of life. The tree that was lost in Eden is, in some real sense, found again in wisdom. Lay hold of her, and you lay hold of the life that was forfeited. Hold her fast, and you are called blessed.

This is, of course, where the New Testament takes us further. The wisdom Solomon is naming will be embodied. *Christ the wisdom of God* — Paul will say (1 Cor. 1:24). The tree of life will reappear in Revelation 22, on either side of the river of the water of life in the new Jerusalem. And between Eden and the new Jerusalem, the tree appears once more — vertical, on a hill outside the city, with the Lord of life nailed to it. The cross is the tree of life. The wisdom Solomon is teaching the son to lay hold of will, in the fullness of time, lay hold of him from the cross.

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew. (vv. 19–20)

And here is the cosmological claim. The wisdom Solomon has been describing is not merely a useful posture for daily life. It is the very thing by which God made the world. He founded the earth by wisdom. He established the heavens by understanding. By His knowledge, the deeps broke open and the clouds give the dew.

When you walk in wisdom, you are walking in the grain of the universe. You are aligning your life with the very pattern by which God made everything. Foolishness is not just unfortunate — foolishness is going against the structure of reality. Wisdom is going with it. This is why wisdom works: not because it is a clever life-hack, but because the universe was made by wisdom and for wisdom. The wise man and the world were made for each other.

Wisdom Lived Outward: Verses 21–31

My son, do not lose sight of these — keep sound wisdom and discretion, and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble. (vv. 21–23)

The third *my son*, and the focus turns outward — to how wisdom is carried into the world, into sleep, into the neighborhood, into dealings with men. *Lose sight* — *al-yaluzu* — to slip away, to depart from view. Wisdom can be present one moment and gone the next. The son is told to keep her in view: *sound wisdom* — *tushiyyah*, that rare word from 2:7, effective and abiding wisdom — and *discretion* — *mezimmah*, purposeful planning, the capacity to think ahead.

Wisdom adorns. Wisdom secures. The wise man walks confidently — not because his road is easy, but because his foot has been trained.

If you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. (v. 24)

This is one of the most quietly beautiful promises in the chapter. The wise man sleeps. Think about what that means. Anxiety is the great thief of sleep. The man who has put his weight down on his own understanding lies in bed running scenarios he cannot control. The man who has put his weight on the LORD lies down — and his sleep is sweet. This is the practical fruit of verse 5. The man who trusts the LORD with all his heart gets to sleep. The wisdom of God is medicine for insomnia.

Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes, for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught. (vv. 25–26)

The wise man does not panic. Sudden terror — the unexpected disaster — does not undo him. The ruin of the wicked, when it comes, does not sweep him away. Why? Because the LORD is his *kesel* — his confidence, his loins, his strength. The LORD keeps his foot from the snare. This is not a promise that nothing bad will happen. It is a promise that when bad things happen, he will not be undone by them. His confidence is not in his circumstances. His confidence is in the LORD.

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it" — when you have it with you. (vv. 27–28)

And now the turn to the neighbor. Wisdom that does not love the neighbor is not wisdom.

Verse 27 is striking: *do not withhold good from those to whom it is due*. There is good owed to others. The wise man recognizes this. There are debts of kindness, debts of help, debts of justice — and the wise man pays them. *When it is in your power to do it*. Solomon is not commanding the impossible. He is commanding the possible. When you can help, help. When you can give, give. Do not delay what you have the power to do today.

Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you. Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm. Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways. (vv. 29–31)

Your neighbor's trust is itself a sacred thing. He has lowered his guard around you. He has assumed you wish him no harm. To plan evil against the man who trusts you is to violate something holy — to take advantage of the very disposition that makes neighborly life possible. And do not pick fights. Do not invent grievances. Solomon assumes that there are real reasons to contend, and the wise man may at times have to. But the wise man does not manufacture conflict.

And here is the perennial temptation. The man of violence appears to win. He gets what he takes. He bullies and prospers. The young man watches him and is tempted to admire him. Solomon says no. Do not envy. Do not choose his ways. The path of violence looks like power, but it is not power. It is the way of fools, and it ends where folly ends.

Two Persons, Two Houses, Two Rewards: Verses 32–35

For the devious person is an abomination to the LORD, but the upright are in his confidence. The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous. Toward the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor. The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace. (vv. 32–35)

The chapter closes with two men and two destinies.

The *devious* person — *naloz*, the twisted one, the crooked man — is *to'evah* to the LORD. An abomination. What God hates, what is intolerable in His sight. But the *upright* — *yesharim*, those whose lives have been made straight, the same root as the *make straight* of verse 6 — are in the LORD's *sod*. The intimate counsel. The inner circle. The friendship of the king. The upright are taken into the LORD's confidence, sharing His counsels, knowing His mind. This is what was promised to Abraham — *Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?* (Gen. 18:17). This is what the Lord Jesus said to His disciples — *No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you* (John 15:15). The upright are in the *sod* of the LORD.

Two houses follow. The house of the wicked is under the LORD's curse. The dwelling of the righteous is under His blessing. The whole structure of a household — the family within, the welfare of the home — turns on which way the inhabitants are walking.

Toward the scorner, God is scornful. The scorner gets back what he gives. He scoffs at God; God scoffs at him. But to the humble, God gives *favor* — grace, what is not deserved. This verse is quoted twice in the New Testament, once in James 4:6 and once in 1 Peter 5:5: *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*. The humble get grace. There is no other way to get it.

And the chapter ends where chapters 1 and 2 ended — with the two ends of the two ways. *Inherit* — *yinchalu* — to receive as a permanent possession, like the inheritance of land. And the inheritance of the wise is *kavod* — honor, the same word as the *honor the LORD* of verse 9. The man who gave weight to the LORD inherits weight from the LORD. But fools *lift up disgrace*. They carry it. They hoist it onto themselves. The Hebrew is striking: they do not stumble into shame; they take it up.

Conclusion

Wisdom is not a book on a shelf. Wisdom is not a lecture you attend. Wisdom is a life you live — inward, upward, outward.

Inward: do not forget. Bind *chesed* and *emet* around your neck. Trust the LORD with all your heart, and stop trying to lean the weight of your life on a frame too small to hold it. Bring Him the first of the basket, before you know how the season will turn out.

Upward: do not despise His discipline. The hand that corrects you is the hand that loves you. Lay hold of wisdom as a tree of life, and discover that her ways are pleasantness and her paths are peace. You are walking in the grain of the universe. You were made for this.

Outward: sleep sweetly. Do not withhold good. Do not exploit the trust of the one who dwells beside you. Do not envy the man of violence; his way ends where folly ends.

And remember where this is going. The wisdom Solomon is teaching the son to lay hold of will, in the fullness of time, lay hold of us — from a tree, on a hill, outside a city.

The tree of life lost in Eden, named here in Proverbs 3, planted again on Golgotha, and waiting for us by the river in the new Jerusalem. Christ the wisdom of God. Lay hold of Him. Hold Him fast. And you will be called blessed.

May the LORD make our paths straight, our sleep sweet, our barns sufficient, and our hearts His own. Amen.