

Explore the Bible: The Choice

June 8, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible Lesson for June 28 focuses on Proverbs 4:11-27.*

I'm a walker. I love going for long walks, regardless of the weather. It gives me time to be alone, to think and to get in some good exercise. I've been taking long walks since I was a child. I've noticed over the years that when I live in one place long enough, I tend to follow fairly established routes. Sure, I might vary things a little bit from time to time, but when I go for walks, I almost always follow a general pre-set route.

What is true of my walks generally is also true of people's lives. We are creatures of habit. We establish routines and follow them, even if we are not entirely conscious or intentional in so doing. In many dimensions of our lives, this is harmless or even helpful.

But some of our routines can be dangerous. I once had a friend who had a habit of leaving his car unlocked—with his keys *inside*. I'll give you three guesses why that's a dangerous routine into which to fall. There are other routines and habits that can be harmful not only to ourselves, but to others as well. If you're a gun owner, a habit of leaving your gun loaded and unsecured in your house can carry tragic consequences for family or friends.

This same general wisdom applies to our walk with God, too.

Paths of righteousness

The first portion of this passage (4:11-17) contrasts the "way of wisdom" with the "path of the wicked." One leads to life, the other to destruction of

self and others. The author encourages his readers to stay firm in the way of wisdom by clinging to instruction (4:13). This is key: wisdom is not inherent in us, nor is it something we simply acquire in a single dose. It requires constant instruction and faithful application.

Just as my walking routes are not established by my first steps in a new place, we do not simply “fall into” the way of wisdom. We must learn it and be careful to walk in it. Only years and years of practice can help turn this intentionality into a routine which brings life and security.

In the same way, following the path of the wicked has a self-reinforcing aspect. The longer you walk along it, the more difficult it will be to step away. Sin is habit-forming, and its destructive power is not immediately apparent. The pleasures of sin are addictive. Indeed, rejecting sin can bring about a form of withdrawal symptoms. The text speaks of those who follow the path of the wicked, saying, “For they cannot rest until they do evil; they are robbed of sleep till they make someone stumble” (4:16).

Notice how this evil is not private. Our sin does not simply harm us; it harms others. When we walk in the path of the wicked, we want others to join us. We want others to stumble, stagger and trip alongside us on the road to self-destruction.

Light and darkness

A brief interlude (4:18-19) uses the imagery of the sun and darkness to further contrast the “path of the righteous” and the “way of the wicked.” The path of righteousness is bright. It is well-lit. You can see ahead of you and watch where you step. But the way of the wicked is dark; you can’t even see the destruction into which you risk falling.

I temporarily was rendered functionally blind during my junior year of high school. While I eventually adjusted, the brief beginning period was

terrifying. My own home, which was a place of security and peace, became a place of danger. I risked slamming into a wall or tumbling down the stairs any time I tried to move around, simply because I could not see. (Needless to say, I took a hiatus from my habitual walks during this time.)

Imagine living your whole life like that. Imagine everywhere you walk being obscured in darkness. You'd have no idea when you're about to trip and fall, slam into something or bump into someone. Such is the way of the wicked. So many dangers hidden just out of sight, with no way of detecting them before it's too late.

Walking a straight line

The final section of our text (4:21-27) reinforces the need to practice at wisdom and wisdom. As mentioned above, this is not something you can simply learn quickly in one shot. You must work hard to establish routines. "Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil" (4:26-27).

How do we do this? Thankfully, we Christians have an example to follow: Jesus Christ. We are called to imitate Christ (1 John 2:6). But what does this mean? The Apostle Paul gives us a great example.

Paul encourages the Corinthians to imitate him, just as he imitates Christ (1 Corinthians 4:18; 11:1). What does Paul do that the Corinthians are to imitate? He willingly surrenders his rights and privileges in order to serve others. Just as Jesus Christ surrendered his heavenly privileges to die on the cross for our sins and save us, Paul willingly gave up a safe and comfortable life in order to bring the gospel to others.

The finer details of such a path require careful study and practice and cannot be learned overnight. Yet the path of the righteous is first and

foremost a path of self-sacrifice for the good of others.

Joshua Sharp is a writer and Bible teacher living in Waco. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary.