

How do you plan wisely?

After all, if God is in control, why plan?

If all of our plans are subject to God's sovereign rule,
who needs to plan?!

Proverbs 16 shows how God's sovereignty *includes* our planning in his purposes.

Likewise, Proverbs 16 talks about the role of the King -- the Son of David –
in the life of God's people:

"In the light of a king's face there is life,
and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rains" (v15).

The gospel of John agrees: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

And so, as we plan and prepare for our future, we need to keep our eyes on the King!

The end of chapter 15 points both backwards and forwards in its themes;
but it also points forward in using synthetic parallels – like the following chapters.

Notice that the “light of the eyes” comment in verse 30
will be reflected later in 16:15, with the light of the king’s face.

And at the heart of these four verses at the end of chapter 15 is the fear of the LORD.

1. Humanity, the LORD, and His King (15:30-16:15)

a. The Fear of the LORD (15:30-33)

*The light of the eyes rejoices the heart,
and good news refreshes^[e] the bones.*

³¹ *The ear that listens to life-giving reproof
will dwell among the wise.*

³² *Whoever ignores instruction despises himself,
but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.*

³³ *The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom,
and humility comes before honor.*

As we’ve often seen,

the opening line makes a factual statement:

“the light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the bones.”

It’s not saying that this *should* happen – it’s that this *does* happen.

The light of the eyes rejoices the heart.

You could paraphrase this as “A fine sight cheers the mind”

Just as good news refreshes the bones (literally, “makes the bones fat”).
You want *fat* bones!

So in one sense, this is just saying obvious statements:
When you see something good – your heart is glad.
And when you hear good news – you feel better – stronger!

But once you realize that Proverbs is not merely a grab bag of wise sayings –
but actually has movement – and sees connections within larger literary units –
then you start to see that the “good news” here is really the *gospel* –
the good news of the kingdom of God
(as the following verses will show!).

Verses 31-32 point us to the importance of hearing reproof:

³¹ *The ear that listens to life-giving reproof
will dwell among the wise.*

³² *Whoever ignores instruction despises himself,
but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.*

Accepting reproof is hard.
We don’t like to be rebuked –
and we generally see ourselves as being *right* most of the time.

It was interesting to read about the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle.
The protesters who have taken over the neighborhood
certainly thought of their own goals and objectives as most noble!
They worked very hard to show that they are a peaceful movement –
and so they don’t need police!

As I listened to their view of themselves, I couldn’t help but wonder:
what are they going to do when something goes wrong?

What happens when someone gets robbed?
Who will they call?
They say in their signs that there are no bad protesters –
and there are no good police.
So... who will they call?

Themselves?

How will they enforce justice?

If they try, then they have become “police” –
but they have already decided that there are no good police...

But if they don't enforce justice –
then theft and murder will go unpunished...

Is that really the sort of community they want to live in?

The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.
And indeed, the one who ignores instruction despises *himself*.

And so verse 33 sets us up for the whole of chapter 16 by saying:

³³ *The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom,
and humility comes before honor.*

Everyone wants honor.

Everyone wants to be thought of as “someone.”
But the path of wisdom does not insist on “honor.”
The path of wisdom starts with the fear of the LORD.
The path of wisdom starts with humility.

(notice verse 5 – “everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD”)

Oh, and by the way, this path never changes.
I'm nearly 50 –
and I'm reaching that place in life where I am tempted to think,
“now I deserve that honor!”
But that's not the way it works!
The path of wisdom *always* starts with humility.

As Bruce Waltke points out,

“The one who grants himself no glory before the glorious God
in the end is crowned with the glory and wealth that give him social esteem.
This radical humility toward the LORD
paves the way for the next subunit
contrasting the LORD's freedom with human limits.” (W 8)

b. If God Is in Control, Why Plan? (16:1-9)

*The plans of the heart belong to man,
but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.*

Proverbs points out that human activity is meaningful and important.

“the plans of the heart belong to a man” –
Your planning – your initiative –
belongs to *you*.
You must design your own life.

No one else can do it for you.
God himself will not do it for you!
You must do it.

“But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.”
At first that may seem to be an odd way of saying it.
But if you think of it in terms of “the right answer”
you will be on the right track –
especially as you go on into verse 2:

² *All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes,
but the LORD weighs the spirit.*

Everyone *thinks* that he is doing the right thing.
We all judge our own actions by the integrity of our motives.
While we judge *others* motives by the effectiveness of their actions!

Only God is capable of judging the hearts of men.
Only God can weigh the spirit.
We are not competent judges for ourselves (much less others!).

We all have blind spots.
And if you knew what it was – it wouldn't be a blind spot!

So as you are planning, as you are engaged in preparing for life –
remember to hold your plans with a certain measure of humility.

And then pray:

³ *Commit your work to the LORD,
and your plans will be established.*

As a case-study about planning,
I would like to use our session's approach to Covid-19.
Yesterday afternoon we sent out our plan for “what if one of our members catches it.”

How do you plan for the future?
In this case, how do you prepare for possible danger ahead.

As elders we have prayed regularly for our work of shepherding the flock –
and we have committed this work to the LORD.
And so we trust that our plans will be established.
You may have noticed a certain flexibility in our plan.
That's because we do not know what is going to happen.

We could have said “if one person gets sick, we’re shutting everything down” –
and that might be the right answer –
but it is also possible that one case might be caught quickly –
and so there is little danger to others.

Committing your work to the LORD includes both prayer and obedience.

If all you do is say “Lord, bless my plans” –
that's not *committing* your work to the LORD.

Committing your work includes the idea of submitting your work to the LORD –
presenting your work to the LORD in humble obedience to his will.

Verse 4-5 then provide the contrast:

⁴ *The LORD has made everything for its purpose,
even the wicked for the day of trouble.*

⁵ *Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD;
be assured, he will not go unpunished.*

Remember that for the last six chapters, we’ve been seeing antithetical proverbs.

So through last week, we regularly heard the contrasts immediately.

Now we have two whole verses of contrast to verses 1-3.

Verses 1-3 showed us the way to plan wisely.

Now we hear that even the wicked – even the arrogant – has a purpose in God’s plan.

The wicked is *made* for the day of trouble.

Paul reflects on this in Romans 9

when he says that God made some vessels for honor and blessing;
but others vessels of wrath – intended for destruction.

God will make sure that the arrogant in heart gets what he deserves.

Of course, as we consider our own hearts, this may cause no small amount of consternation!

I have been arrogant more times than I know!

Does this mean that *I am intended for destruction?*

Verse 6 answers that:

⁶ *By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for,
and by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil.*

Now – at first blush, this sounds like it is saying that if I have sinned,
then the way to make atonement

is by becoming a person of steadfast love and faithfulness.

And, there is a sense in which that is true.

If you have been on the wrong path, then you need to turn away from evil
(that's called repentance).

And it is by the fear of the LORD that one turns away from evil.

It's only when you fear God more than you fear anything else
that you will pay attention to what he says more than to what others say.

But I've been making the case all through Proverbs that there are all sorts of echoes
of the rest of scripture –

so when it says that “by steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for”
we should read that in the light of what the rest of scripture says!

The word is used only twice in Proverbs – both times in this chapter!

Verse 14 is the other use:

“A king's wrath is a messenger of death,
and a wise man will appease it (or will make atonement for it).”

So plainly in verse 14, the idea of “atonement”
is much less than becoming right with God.

And yet in verse 6, there is plainly an idea of dealing with iniquity.

So this pushes us to ask what is *atonement* in the bible?

The word translated “atoned for” is used over a hundred times in the OT.

The basic idea of *kaphar* is “to cover.”

What is it that *covers* our iniquities?

Sacrifices in the OT were designed to *cover* iniquities.

But the prophets make it clear that the sacrifices did not *replace* repentance!

What does the Lord require of you?

But to do justice and to love mercy (steadfast love – *hesed* – same word here),
and to walk humbly with your God.

We need both sacrifice *and* steadfast love.

And in Jesus Christ we have both.

When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us – he became the sacrifice.

And we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth.

That phrase “grace and truth” in John's gospel

has lots of resonance with *steadfast love and faithfulness* in the OT.

It is ultimately not that *we* showed steadfast love and faithfulness –

it is not that we loved God first –
rather, he loved *us* and gave his own Son as the atoning sacrifice –
the propitiation that covered our sins.

And because *he* showed steadfast love and faithfulness,
therefore *we* are to fear him and turn from evil.

And when we see the world in that way,
that alters everything!

And then (v7):

⁷ *When a man's ways please the LORD,
he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.*

⁸ *Better is a little with righteousness
than great revenues with injustice.*

⁹ *The heart of man plans his way,
but the LORD establishes his steps.*

I want you to see something at the heart of this whole “our planning and God’s sovereignty.”
Your planning winds up included in the big picture of what God is doing!
Your plans become part of the coming of God’s kingdom!

Have you ever thought about that?
As your ways please the LORD,
as you seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
you become more and more a participant in the work of God!
You become a co-worker with God (to use Paul’s phrase in 1 Cor 3:9).

Again – remember that there is no way to *gain* this position with God!
You do not become a co-worker with God by “just trying harder”!
It is God’s mercy – it is God’s grace alone that saves us.

But when God has accepted you in Jesus Christ –
then you *are* pleasing to him!
And when a man’s ways please the LORD,
he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him!

So by now you can probably see how verses 10-15 fit into all this:

c. The Life-Giving Face of the King (16:10-15)

¹⁰ *An oracle is on the lips of a king;
his mouth does not sin in judgment.*

¹¹ *A just balance and scales are the LORD's;*

- all the weights in the bag are his work.*
- ¹² *It is an abomination to kings to do evil,
for the throne is established by righteousness.*
- ¹³ *Righteous lips are the delight of a king,
and he loves him who speaks what is right.*
- ¹⁴ *A king's wrath is a messenger of death,
and a wise man will appease it.*
- ¹⁵ *In the light of a king's face there is life,
and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain.*

Notice how verses 10 and 15 hold the section together:

“An oracle is on the lips of a king; his mouth does not sin in judgment.”
And yet proverbs will also speak of unrighteous kings!
Plainly the King here is none other than the Son of David –
the one whom God promised would sit on David’s throne forever!

And then verse 15 –

“In the light of a king’s face there is life,
and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain.”

It is true that ancient monarchs regularly said such things about themselves.
So one could imagine ancient wisdom literature repeating such vanities!
But Israel’s prophets do not say such things about Israel’s kings!
Even David and Solomon face serious criticism over their failings!

So while this is *supposed* to be true of kings –
all mortal kings have fallen short of such exalted language.

Where do we find life in the light of a king’s face?
Obviously: Jesus!

At the same time, Proverbs is not just saying, “Wait for Messiah to come!”
Proverbs is saying, *this is the way things should be –
so do your best to live like this!*

Verse 11 says that our economic life needs to be lived fairly and honorably.
A just balance – just scales – are the LORD’s –
do not use the things that God has made to cheat others!

Verse 12 says that it is an abomination to kings to do evil.
The throne is established by righteousness.
So if you do bad things that will undermine the king’s throne –
because God does not approve of kings who let bad things happen!

Verse 13 then turns to the flip side of that –
and says that righteous lips are the delight of a king,
and he loves him who speaks what is right.

Again, this is not saying that all kings are this way.
This is describing what kings *should be*.
And yes, even verse 14 describes what should be:
*A king's wrath is a messenger of death,
and a wise man will appease it.*

God calls the king – God calls the magistrate – to bring vengeance on evildoers.
So yes, a king's wrath is a messenger of death –
and, of course, in Hebrew the word “messenger” is the word “angel.”
The king's wrath is an angel of death.

The king *should* get angry about evil and unjust things.
And when the king gets angry, he should use that anger wisely
in bringing wrath upon evildoers.
He should never be out of control!

Just like in parenting – when your kids do something wrong,
your anger should never get out of control!
Your anger should always be quick to listen –
in case you have misunderstood what happened!
But a king's wrath is an angel of death!

And a wise man will appease it (will cover it – make atonement).

Do not argue with the king.
(Perhaps to the point in our day – do not argue with the policeman who just drew his gun)

2. Humility in Word and in Planning (16:16-30)

The last half of our chapter then deals with humility in word and in planning.
As usual, these applications should now be pretty clear and obvious
because of the foundation laid in the first half.

a. Pride Goes before a Fall – the Economics of Wisdom (v16-19)

¹⁶ *How much better to get wisdom than gold!*

To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.

¹⁷ *The highway of the upright turns aside from evil;
whoever guards his way preserves his life.*

¹⁸ *Pride goes before destruction,
and a haughty spirit before a fall.*

¹⁹ *It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor
than to divide the spoil with the proud.*

Verses 16-19 focus on the economics of wisdom –

with the classic warning in verse 18,
“pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”
Humility pays better than pride!
Sure, pride may get you places!
But it cannot keep you there.
You may wish to laugh:
 consider Louis XIV of France – the Sun King –
 who reigned for 72 years back in the 17th century.
He was a proud and arrogant man.
And his pride kept him in power for a long time!

Undoubtedly!
 But 78 years after he died the French people chopped off the head of his heir,
 Louis XVI.
Pride goes before a fall.

This is why I refuse to be discouraged by the current mess.
There is no way for pride and folly to win!
Folly always digs its own grave.
 My only counsel to you...
 is to drop your shovel!

Stop digging!

“It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.”

b. The Sweetness of Gracious Words (v20-24)

- ²⁰ *Whoever gives thought to the word^[b] will discover good,
and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.*
- ²¹ *The wise of heart is called discerning,
and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.*
- ²² *Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it,
but the instruction of fools is folly.*
- ²³ *The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious
and adds persuasiveness to his lips.*
- ²⁴ *Gracious words are like a honeycomb,
sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*

Verses 20-24 then turn to the sweetness of gracious words.

The ESV footnote points out that the Hebrew word for “word”
can also mean “matter,” or “thing,”
and indeed it is likely that verse 20 has to do with thinking things through.
But the ESV recognizes the predominance of “word” words in the passage! (yay!)

Verse 20 “word”
Verse 21 “speech”
Verse 22 “instruction”
Verse 23 “speech”
Verse 24 “word”

It’s a chiasm of words about words!

And not just ordinary words, clunky words, boring words....

but gracious words, sweetness of speech, a fountain of life,
judicious speech, persuasive lips!

Such words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body!

I want to be like that when I grow up!

Because the alternative is found in verses 25-30

c. The Disaster of Dishonest Plans (v25-30)

²⁵ *There is a way that seems right to a man,
but its end is the way to death.^[c]*

²⁶ *A worker's appetite works for him;
his mouth urges him on.*

²⁷ *A worthless man plots evil,
and his speech^[d] is like a scorching fire.*

²⁸ *A dishonest man spreads strife,
and a whisperer separates close friends.*

²⁹ *A man of violence entices his neighbor
and leads him in a way that is not good.*

³⁰ *Whoever winks his eyes plans^[e] dishonest things;
he who purses his lips brings evil to pass.*

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

Dishonest men have dishonest plans.

We’re back to the crooked – the worthless – the violent –

those whose words are like a scorching fire!

who by their whispers “separates close friends.”

Remember where we started.

We all tend to interpret our own actions charitably –

because we had good motives!

But we don’t have access to other peoples thoughts –

so we tend to interpret their motives according to their actions!

And we can even quote scripture: “by their fruit you will know them!”

How often have you heard it (or said it!):

“if she didn’t mean it, she wouldn’t have said it!”

The last verses of chapter 16 connect more with chapter 17 –
but they are a fitting conclusion tonight:

(v31-33)

Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.

Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty,

and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

Plan well, live well, speak well – and you will gain a crown of glory.

Be slow to anger – rule your spirit – exercise self-control – practice it!

And then, as you face those decisions that you have make on the fly –
don't stress about it!

And if you have two good options and you can’t choose between them,
cast lots – flip a coin – draw straws!

If you genuinely have two good options that are both pleasing to God
then flip a coin (and when it comes up tails –

and you suddenly realize that you really wanted heads –
then go with heads!)

Flipping a coin is not a magic act that guarantees God’s blessing!

When it says that its every decision is from the LORD –

that simply means that God sovereignly has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”