

Proverbs 16:31-33
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The Peaceful Life
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Introduction

We have an interesting selection of proverbs. We are told that gray hair is a glorious crown; patience is more effective than strength; and an act of chance is a sure thing that it is of God. What I hope you will obtain from these lessons is the solution to a peaceful life.

Text

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

Gray hair is a crown of glory. I like that. Let me read a similar proverb: “The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair” (20:29). If there was only another proverb that said something like, “How magnificent is the head unencumbered with temporal hair”!

We take the opposite view of gray hair. We think it is gained in a trying life. “You kids are enough to give me gray hair!” “I didn’t have gray hair until I took this job.” We envy the man or woman able to enter middle age with no gray hairs. If Solomon is trying to lure us into living a righteous life with the promise of gray hair as our crown, he needs to hire a marketing firm. This will not fly. “Would you like to turn your hair gray? Try living a righteous life.”

This proverb comes out of a culture that honors old age. The law, in Leviticus 19:32, commanded respect: “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.” In general, the older the person, the more respect he or she was given for possessing wisdom. The elders of Jewish society were the authorities and judges. Thus the term, which originally refers to age, took on the added meaning of leader. The proverb already quoted—“The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair” (20:29)—is not exalting a hair color but wisdom. Young men have strength; old men (and women) have wisdom.

Though the biblical writers honored old age, they were also realistic about its problems. Psalm 71 was written by someone who had entered into old age. His problem is this: Now that he is old and no longer strong, his enemies are trying to take advantage of him. That certainly is a problem the elderly can relate to today. So he prays to God to be his protector.

- 9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
forsake me not when my strength is spent...
- 18 So even to old age and gray hairs,

O God, do not forsake me,
 20 You who have made me see many troubles and calamities
 will revive me again...

Old age literally has its aches and pains. Perhaps the most unsettling factor of growing old is growing weaker, unable to protect and provide for oneself as once able.

Even so, old age is to be valued by those who attain it because (and this is the essential element) of living a righteous life. Gray hair is not this proverb's focus. It is being a righteous person, i.e. a person who is morally good, treats others justly, and is devoted to God. Long, productive life is often the reward for such persons, whose gray hair serves as evidence.

God rewards a good life with length of life. But also to the point is that living a righteous life avoids the pitfalls of the wicked and foolish life so that one is able to live out one's days. How many men and women have died young because of their foolish ways? Poor decisions about lifestyles, ways to pursue pleasure, were as Proverbs 16:25 says, seemed right at the time, but in truth were ways to death: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."

32 *Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
 and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.*

This is an important principle to learn, and the ones who have learned it (both the righteous and the wicked) have achieved great success in life. Even the wicked know the truth of this proverb.

Anger is a powerful passion. Anger can increase strength due to the rush of adrenaline, giving an individual the power to accomplish more than expected. When two football teams are preparing to play one another, the coaches often try to find ways to make their players upset with the opposing team. They will post articles that quote the opposition coaches and players badmouthing their team. "Are you going to let them say those things about you?" They want their team fired up.

But oftentimes such a strategy backfires. More often, anger leads to defeat rather than victory. The smartest coaches and competitors know this. They know that though anger may increase strength, it clouds thinking. They want an angry opponent.

I remember a basketball team of talented players that nevertheless struggled because of the inability of most of the players to handle anger. The most talented member often had to sit on the bench because of losing her anger during the game. She would get fouled, then get mad, and then get reckless. Another player would sulk if the ball was stolen from her. But there was another player who would get knocked down, perhaps have the ball stolen, but would immediately bounce back up and keep playing aggressively. Indeed, she would take advantage of the opposing players by getting them angry with her

aggressive play. She did not need anger to motivate her. She simply kept focused on her goal.

It is the one who keeps focused, who remains patient and perseveres that wins the victory and keeps the victory. That is the point of the second half of the proverb: *“he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”* Many persons have won victories in sports or business or the military only to lose what they gained. Their anger got them the burst of energy to win the battle, but they had not the wisdom to know what to do when they won. Essential to military success is knowing one’s limits and not overstretching. An army can win too much territory too quickly, exposing itself to counterattack.

Besides leading one to fail because of clouding one’s ability to think well and to focus, anger creates opposition that causes further difficulties. People who would be supportive draw back and even become opponents. A leader loses devoted followers who witness him go into a rage. A store clerk ready to help a customer becomes cold when that customer vents his frustration. People willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, suddenly give you no break when they are exposed to your anger.

Anger can be helpful and even the right emotion to have depending on the circumstance. But the key is that we must control our anger to make it useful rather than let anger control us, which is what happens most of the time. We should be angry at injustice. Sometimes it takes anger to get us doing something that normally we would be afraid to do or be indifferent about. Even then, the anger needs to be harnessed, controlled by our wisdom. It is difficult to do; thus, we need to be those who are slow to anger.

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

Casting the lot is the same as flipping the coin or choosing straws. It is an odd activity when you think about it. A chance act is used not merely to make a decision but to determine the will of the divine. King David organized the work of the temple priests by this method. The priest Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, entered the Holy Place to offer incense because the cast lot fell on his name finally after many years. By casting lots, Joshua discovered whose sin led to the Israelites’ defeat in battle. By casting lot, it was determined that the Lord had chosen Saul to be Israel’s first king. The High Priest carried the Urim and Thummim, lots cast to inquire of the Lord decisions to be made. By casting lots the sailors singled out Jonah as the guilty one bringing the storm upon them. The last mention of casting lots in the Bible is Acts 1:23-26 where the eleven disciples choose another to replace Judas: “And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

Casting lots does seem a precarious method of determining God’s will. One would think that such a book as Proverbs would disapprove of the method, because its writings exalt wisdom, knowledge, and counsel. Casting lots seems to be diametrically opposed to such things, depending upon the chance roll of the dice to settle difficult issues. When the two

women came to King Solomon to settle their dispute of who was the true mother of a baby, the king did not cast lots to solve the matter. He used wisdom.

Actually, Proverbs does not instruct us to turn to the casting of lots as a normal means of making decisions. It mentions the activity one other time in 18:18: “The lot puts an end to quarrels and decides between powerful contenders.” This proverb seems to use lots for much the same reason we do today: when there is no clear reason why to choose one side over the other, flip a coin. Parents may do that to determine which child gets the last piece of pie, football game officials do it to determine who gets the ball first, and so on. It is amazing at how well such a method works. Quarrels will, most of the time, stop immediately.

Here is the point that I think our proverb is making: whatever the “lot” may be, we should take the outcome as being the Lord’s will. That lot may be a coin or a straw; it may be a decision made after arduous study and seeking the Lord’s will through prayer and counsel. However we arrive at a course of action, we are in essence casting our lot. Who knows if we have really made the right decision? We are sinful beings limited in our ability to reason well and without prejudice. And even if we take a rational course based on the facts at hand, who knows the future? Who knows where lightning will strike or a terrorist? Who can anticipate every possible consequence of every decision? Every day, every conscious and unconscious decision is a “casting of the lot” before the Lord. Our proverb tells us to take comfort, knowing that whatever takes place is ultimately in the hand of the Lord.

The wise understand this. The reason they become wise is that they learn from everything that happens to them. They see a purpose even if the purpose is to teach them how bad life can get. But more to the point is that we are to take every decision that has impacted our lives as God’s will for us, even when the decisions occurred from our sin and foolishness. We are then to learn, grow, and bring forth good from the “lots” cast for us or cast by us in life.

Lessons

I have titled this sermon “The Peaceful Life.” Because I select titles in advance to preparing my sermons, sometimes I am off base connecting title with scripture text. But I think I got it right this time, for those persons who have arrived at old age and are peaceful are those who have learned and practiced the lessons of these proverbs.

To live the righteous life is to be freed of the guilt that plagues many people who must carry in their minds the hurt they have caused in their lives – shattered marriages and families, the shattered dreams of others broken by their mean-spiritedness, the shame of immorality, the years of rebellion against their Lord. Living a righteous life is living a life with fewer regrets. One may experience great trials, and, indeed, we are told in 2 Timothy 3:12 that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” But it is one thing to suffer because of trials; it is another to suffer because of the trials you have brought on yourself and others.

Those who continue to live righteous lives in their old age continue to experience the peace that such living brings. They sleep well at night with a clear conscience. And as Proverbs teaches many times, such a life tends to cause good things to happen.

Certainly we should see the connection between being slow to anger and possessing peace. It is the person at peace who is most capable of controlling his anger, and such control leads to peace. Contrary to popular belief that venting one's anger releases stress, what truly releases stress is learning to be at peace with others, with oneself, and, most of all, with God.

How does one obtain such peace? Two factors make the difference. One is to grasp the truth of our last proverb that the circumstances of our lives are in the hands of the Lord. When we can appreciate the meaning this truth gives to our lives, we will have peace that takes us through the most trying times. We never do really know what our lot will turn out to be no matter how well we try to prepare for the future or make decisions. Did we take the right job? Choose the right school, the right major? Did we make the right choice for marriage? Did we...? It can be endless. The young person keeps worrying about how his decision affects his future. What if he made the wrong turn and is locked into a dismal life? The "gray hair" ponders whether his life has been worthwhile. Too late now to change the years. What peace it is to know that the Lord makes whatever our lot is, will be, or has been meaningful in some way.

Romans 8:28 gives an added bonus to this thought of what happens being in the Lord's hands. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." What we go through is not merely our "lot in life." It is our good in life, for our Lord uses all things for our ultimate good—that of being conformed to the image of his Son. And so, peace comes from knowing that all things that happen to us lay in the hands of our good God who is working all things for our ultimate good.

Resting in the knowledge that all decisions and actions rest in God's providence provides peace. But there is another factor even more important, and that is to know a redemption that also rests in God's hands. Let's be realistic; there is no one perfectly righteous. The best are guilty of breaking every commandment, and everyone has left a trail of mistakes, failures, and pain. None of us can stand before our Maker and give an adequate account of our lives. We can say we did the best we could, but even that is not true. More accurate is that we did the best we could without yielding fully to God and with keeping our own interests our priority. No, what we need is redemption for our Maker to forgive us and to be at peace with us.

Old age is truly gained in the righteous life of Christ exchanged for our sinful life, for it is an eternal life in glory. Such a life is a life now of peace. Is it not peace to know that you will never perish? That you will never be cast away from God? That you are in your Father's hands? That, well, listen to what it meant to the apostle Paul:

If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ...

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:31–39

Such knowledge brings a peaceful life. Such knowledge is offered to you.