

Rethinking the Promise of Proverbs 22:6

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Of the numerous passages in the Scriptures which admonish the parent concerning the rearing of children, the Book of Proverbs contains some of the most pithy and memorable. Who cannot finish the citation, "Spare the rod and..."? Numerous proverbs have endured in the collective consciousness of our society due to their candid and brilliantly formulated verities, which distill the complexity of our human condition into delightful simplicity. Others, however, give us pause when considering the weighty responsibilities and ethical implications of the text. Perhaps the most provocative exhortation to parents can be found in Proverbs 22:6:

**Train the child for the path of his life, and when he is old,
he will not depart from it.**

Here we have an extraordinary verse. Human life is divided into the spheres of familial development and later, mature deportment. It appears to be a promise, if not a formula, by which the parental training and the child's later lifestyle will enjoy unequivocal continuity. Although the two phases of life are recognized, they are, indeed, inextricably joined via the imparted path. It is not surprising, then, when encountering this proverb in the local church, that the element of continuity has become a formula of success, extrapolated with mathematical precision. Which one of us has not met parents who have

adopted this proverb as their pedagogical credo, taken comfort in its promise and known unruffled success? And are there not equally many in our churches who adopt, *bona fide*, the same responsibilities of consistent, genuine and loving training, only to be shattered by the dissolute lifestyles of their adult children? The former insist, correctly, that the Lord's promises have proven faithful. The latter compound their pain with the inevitable conclusion of parental failure. Why does this proverb appear only sometimes to hold true?

The answer is not readily apparent and lacks formulaic precision. While most assume that the proverb does not demand perfection,¹ we are yet disturbed by the uneven experience among believers; we ponder: What of the training? Has the parents' "faith" been genuine and free of hypocrisy? Have there been unfortunate circumstances which have left some families exposed to damaging influences, hence nullifying otherwise good training? These questions, typically asked, resist any clear answer, for who can know or measure these things? If we attempt to do so, we quickly find ourselves in the place of Job's comforters, searching for the elusive root of guilt. Add to our inquiry the remarkable counter-examples of God's grace (such as nominally Christian or pagan households producing glowing disciples of Christ), and the outcome of our deliberations becomes more uncertain still. One thing does seem sure: there is not always an observable correspondence between parental training and the child's adult behaviour.

Perhaps we should inquire whether the common understanding of Proverbs 22:6 as a "formula for success" is, in some aspect, fundamentally flawed. Does Proverbs 22:6 make any promise at all? If so, are there conditions? Who actually carries responsibility? Is there any encouragement here for those who have trained children who have "left the way"? The following analysis is an attempt to answer this question by examining the constituent elements of the verse.

To train

The Hebrew verb *נָחַר* means, when applied to persons, to train or initiate. As such, it is rare in its OT usage.² We find its only other

¹ The notion of the "way" and "departing from it" tend to be vague categories for most, so that the determination of what constitutes failure is inevitably lenient. The observable tendency is to overlook missteps as part of the learning, failure being adjudged only in extreme cases.

² Although the use of the verb here is singular, the Proverbs are not silent in the matter of training children. Instruction, *מָסַר*, is cited 24 times, most of which indicate parental training, as 1:8-9: "Listen, my son, to your father's

biblical incidence in Genesis 14:14, where Abraham calls forth his “trained” men to help recover his nephew, Lot.³ The verb has an element of “starting off” in its meaning, as the translators of the New English Bible, for instance, have elected to show in their rendering of this verse, “Start a boy on the right path...” The sense, then, is a training which inaugurates, or more graphically, launches the child into adulthood (and, ultimately, unto the safe haven of old age). Here we find, typical of the proverbial form, the drawing together of extremes. In this case the initiation and completion of life, as seen in the child and the old man, illustrate the ultimate value and wisdom of the author’s command to train. The effort expended is valuable, because, simply put, instruction does not lose its vitality. The training which is imparted belongs to those things which, like wisdom, are timeless and suffer no depreciation. The proverb captures this truth, and is intended to strengthen the parents in their sacred charge. The emphasis is, then, not actually the child (as many read the verse), but rather the parents, and their crucial didactic role in the child’s life. Our proverb’s decidedly positive outcome depends, not upon the child, but upon the initial discipline of training. As the voice of wisdom calls out elsewhere in Proverbs for children to heed parental instruction (with stern warnings!),⁴ our verse calls the parents to the responsibility of providing this instruction. The tenor here is encouraging; for those who undertake this considerable endeavour (in obedience), the results are

instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.” An interesting aspect of instruction is that it is treated as an object which can be received (the wise) or despised (the fool). The responsibility here is placed upon the young, and the resultant path is determined by this choice. In terms of understanding our passage, it is unfortunate that the LXX cannot be consulted, as this verse was not transmitted in the Greek OT text.

³ The verb is elsewhere used to convey the sense of beginning or dedication, for example of a house (Deut. 20:5) or the Temple (1 Kgs. 8:63). The nominal form, הַנְּכִיחַ is translated “dedication, consecration”. Examples can be found in 2 Chr. 7:9 (the altar), Neh.12:27 (the wall of Jerusalem), or most famously, 1 Macc. 4:52, in the (re)dedication of the (desecrated) Temple under Judas Maccabeus on the 25th of Chislev, faithfully remembered today as *Hanukkah*.

⁴ It should be noted that the book of Proverbs assumes *shared* responsibility for the child’s eventual choice of lifestyle, being replete with commands to children, as well. The instruction stands between parent and child as objective truth, which the child may indeed reject (depicted as being hardened to instruction). There appears to be no assumption that the parents are solely responsible for the outcome.

sure (promise).⁵ A parent might well wish for more details, considering the pivotal role of their training in the child's life. The brevity of the proverbial form precludes, however, the inclusion of any methodological tips or didactic goals. It appears that the author assumes a certain level of consensus in the matter of training, or perhaps simply allows for a degree of latitude in terms of its implementation.⁶

The path

As our proverb does not include the particulars of training, its objective, "his way", is similarly lacking in descriptive detail. Here we find the common noun, דרך, which means way or path in both the literal and figurative senses. 22:6, of course, is speaking of a figurative path, a way of living. It should be noted that the noun is modified as "his path", i.e., the path of the child to be trained. This may be a reference to instruction appropriate for a child (basic skills), but it seems more likely that the common translation "in the way he should go" catches the sense of training which is fitting for the challenges of adult life, as well. This would be in concord with the broader use of the word in the Hebrew Bible, which indicates an observable manner of living. Not surprisingly, the "path" is usually characterized as either good or evil. In Genesis 6:12, we read that the people of earth had adopted corrupt ways, resulting in the judgment of the deluge. Prominent OT figures, including the kings of Israel and Judah, were assessed in terms of their "way". The "way of the Lord", in turn, serves as the universal rubric for covenant fidelity and as a contrast to the lifestyle of the unbeliever or apostate. The Book of Proverbs contains the most instances of the word, and follows the broader biblical pattern of identifying the path of life in either positive or negative terms. Those who are on the wrong "path of death" are the fool (refusing wisdom and instruction), the sluggard, seducers, liars, the wicked, etc. In contrast, the righteous and wise walk in the way of wisdom and life, the "way of the Lord." Although the Proverbs do not explicate the term, it is most certainly a

⁵ As children receive both command and promise in the fifth commandment, it may be that our verse provides a similar command-promise pattern for parents. If so, the expectations of faithfulness in the life of the instructed child should be extrapolated in similar terms to our understanding of the considerable blessings promised to obedient children.

⁶ A brief scanning of the Book of Proverbs shows that there was much being said about training children, including matters and methods of correction, instruction, discipline, and establishing/avoiding habits, all seasoned with vivid illustrations.

reference to God's will as revealed in the narratives of the Patriarchs, as well as the instruction of the Law and the Prophets. For the faithful follower of Yahweh, "the way of the Lord" always played the central role of ethical (re)orientation. We can assume that the intended "child's way" was, in terms of instruction, cast by the faithful recounting of the ancient traditions (portraying both good and evil), with particular attention given to the gracious and sovereign works of God.

The way, then, can be characterized as being a manner of living which is learned through the process of instruction and carefully held in contrast to the way of evil. Not merely a single principle from which life is interpreted, it is a full-bodied *Weltanschauung* that integrates the complexities of life with the character and will of God. The command assumes that the parents themselves, as engaged believers, are intimately familiar with the "curriculum". The child is a different story, however. In the initial stages of instruction, this "way of the Lord" must be seen as independent of the child, since it is being mediated (and therefore presented) via the parent. It cannot properly be considered to be the "child's way" until the child has, for lack of a better word, internalized it. The Proverbs speak of "receiving" instruction; this is, it would seem, a process of continual reception and internalization until the point when the "way" truly becomes the child's. The biblical accounts indicate that children at times "walked in the way of their fathers" (for better or worse!), or as with the sons of Eli, chose to reject the lifestyle and instruction of the parents.⁷ Ultimately, then, what is adopted and internalized by the child, good or evil, determines the path of life.

To depart

This word, rendered סר in Hebrew, means, both literally and figuratively, to leave, turn aside, depart. It is haunting in its tone, for it indicates the movement from good to evil, from truth towards darkness. As a matter of life, this infidelity to the truth touches us all: "All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Ps. 14:3; Pauline citation, Rom. 3:10-12). Beyond the universal turning away that is part of fallen humanity, the

⁷ 1 Sam. 2. The sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, had disregarded their father's instruction and dishonoured both him and the Lord. For this the Lord planned to cut them off from long life and blessing (the promises contained in the fifth commandment). Here we see the responsibility for the failure of instruction placed upon the child. Note the positive counter-example of Samuel, who also grew up in Eli's household.

Scripture draws our attention to individuals (and of course, the nation of Israel) who are in danger of departing from the path. This can be seen in the Lord's instruction to Joshua in Joshua 1:7. Note the element of promise here: "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go."⁸ And, as we have seen, the biblical record informs us that it is indeed possible for a child, like the people of Israel and her kings, to reject the instruction of parents (and the Lord). How can it be, then, that our verse claims that the child will not depart from the path?⁹ The simplest answer, of course, is that the child never truly received/adopted the parental instruction, a possibility noted above. Here we could end our deliberations and accept that the discrete responsibilities of instruction and reception operate in total isolation, and that our verse only appears to indicate an intimate bond between the two. The "promise", then, is actually only an observation of the potential of good training, nothing more. This, however, is not the case. There is a clear promissory element attached to obedience to the Lord's command, which we may not dismiss. But how can we make sense of the promise in light of the possibility of the child rejecting instruction, as is manifestly evident in both the Scripture and our own experience?

The answer may be found in a closer analysis of the biblical use of the verb סור. As noted above, it has a literal sense, such as to turn away from a path, turn into a house, etc. This is quite common in the OT narrative. Its most infrequent usage, in contrast, is of that mentioned above, when a person (or the people of God) figuratively leave the way by turning from God's instruction. This has been the meaning associated with our verse: the child, being instructed in the way, consequently remains in it. Here the emphasis is the child, and his/her conformity to the instruction. The emphasis of our verse, however, is not foremost upon the child, but upon the parents' obedience to the command to instruct. Instruction, then, is the condition and guarantor of the promise, not the child (who, without instruction would be as the undisciplined fool spoken of in the Proverbs). The impartation and integration of the training in the child's life is what acts as leaven;

⁸ See also Exod. 32:8; Deut. 9:12, 11:16; Judg. 2:17; the people of Israel; Deut. 17:17, instructions to the king.

⁹ If instruction always carries positive results, then the case law found in Deut. 21:18-21 cannot be logically explained. The parental instruction is assumed to be adequate, and the responsibility for disobedience and rebellion is laid solely at the feet of the child.

without it, there is no expectation of ultimate success. This brings us to another, more frequent usage of the verb סור. Here we do not find a person remaining or leaving an essential object such as the way (where the person is central and actively effects a change through departing), but rather the essential object departs from the person(s). A few examples illustrate this particular usage, with the verb to depart in boldface:

- Genesis 49:10: Jacob pronounces blessings upon his sons, including this prophecy: “The scepter will not **depart** from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.”
- Deuteronomy 4:9: Here Moses commands regarding the lessons which the Israelites had learned in the wilderness: “Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or **let them slip** [depart] from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.”
- Judges 16:19, 20: This citation recounts how both his supernatural strength and the Lord Himself depart from Samson: “...Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength **left** him. Then she called, ‘Samson, the Philistines are upon you!’ He awoke from his sleep and thought, ‘I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.’ But he did not know that the Lord had left him.”

What should we make of these examples?¹⁰ They serve to open the possibility of understanding our verse in another manner. If we allow that essential objects such as instruction, the Spirit of God or blessings can of themselves depart from an individual, the command of Proverbs 22:6 takes on a new meaning, with the emphasis placed appropriately upon the instruction itself. Our verse could then be rendered as follows:

¹⁰ See also: Exod. 8:11, 20; Lev. 13:58; Num. 14:9; 1 Sam. 6:3, 16:23, where we see the hand of God operating in a negative manner; the rest are positive, sustaining workings of God, cf. Num. 12:10; 1 Sam. 16:14; 18:12; 28:15, 16; 2 Kgs. 17:18. It is interesting that these examples represent a departing, in some manner, of the presence or activity of God.

**Train the child for the path of his life, and when he is old,
it will not depart from him.**

This reading, of course, goes against a long tradition of understanding the child as the main agent, with the assumption that leaving the path is the most natural reading. For this reason, any new configuration of the elements will sound awkward. But apart from the matter of familiarity, can this verse legitimately be translated in this manner? Are there not grammatical considerations which would prevent us from conveniently “swapping” the subject and object of the second clause? The answer, in this instance, depends upon one grammatical variable: do both the words for “child” and “path” share the same gender, so as to be interchangeable and hence indistinguishable in their pronominal forms? These words do indeed share the same gender (masculine), so that the second clause actually reads: “...and when he is old, he/it will not depart from it/him.” Our rendering (in boldface), then, is certainly grammatically possible.

Observations

We have noted that the traditional understanding of Proverbs 22:6 is attended with several difficulties regarding the role and effectiveness of instruction, the responsibility of both parent and child, and ultimately, whether this verse can be understood as promise. When understood as promise and read in the traditional manner, there is a need to account for failure. This is normally laid at the feet of the parents, or perhaps, if the reader diminishes the connection between training and promise, the child may be held responsible. Others may, in a candid moment, wonder if the promise has failed. We have attempted to show that the first clause of our verse is directed to the parents, with primary emphasis upon the efficacy of instruction. The promise of the second clause, then, does not depend upon the child, but is related, following the first clause, to the objective value of the instruction. If the obedience to instruction is indeed central to the proverb’s reasoning, a new rendering of the verse is not only possible, but preferable. The promise, then, is that the imparted way, like wisdom itself, remains as a living voice, calling to the child unto old age. If our analysis holds true, parents may be encouraged by the enduring nature of instruction, which remains to guide even a wayward child.