

True Wisdom Perseveres to the End

Intro: How something ends is often more important than how it begins. That principle holds true in most things, not least horse racing. I'm not a horse-racing aficionado, but I'm always interested in people who stand out from the crowd as truly great, and in the sport of horse racing one such man is Jockey **Gary Stevens**. You might remember him as the jockey who played opposite Tobey Maguire in the horse film **Seabiscuit**. When I saw that movie, I thought Stevens was just an actor, but then I found out he was a real jockey – and not just a jockey, one of the best.

He won his first professional race at age 16 and went on to win over 5,000 more before retiring in 2005. Of all those victories, the one he prizes the most was the 1998 Belmont Stakes which he won by a nose. The remarkable thing about that race is not how close it was to call or the fact that the horse he beat by a hair would have won the Triple Crown. The remarkable thing is that he started the race slowly and spent most of it near the back of the pack. For almost the whole race it looked like a sure loss for Gary Stevens, until the final seconds as he crept up on the outside and won. The '98 Belmont proves that what counts is not how you start a race but how you finish it.

-> The same point is made by these first four verses of Proverbs 3. For two chapters Solomon's been impressing on his sons the importance of seeking God's wisdom. He first defined it, then last week showed us the dire consequences of rejecting wisdom and the blessing of embracing it. It's likely that Solomon's sons initially took to heart what he was saying. After all, this was Solomon, the greatest of kings sitting in his palace surrounded by people who'd traveled far and wide to hear his wisdom. What boy wouldn't thrill to have such a father, learn from him and imitate him? God's wired boys to see their dads as heroes. It was likely no different for Solomon and his sons as he began teaching them.

But these verses that begin chapter 3 show that initial acceptance of God's wisdom isn't good enough. What's needed with wisdom isn't flash-in-the-pan excitement but long-term perseverance. What counts isn't how we start the race of life, but how we finish it. That's clear in vv. 1 & 3 (read).

A. A divine principle of promised blessing for persevering in faithfulness

Solomon's boys spent their childhoods surrounded by Israelite worship. Their grandfather's Psalms were likely the songs they knew best. They saw their dad spend years replacing the tabernacle with a grand Temple and saw worshippers stream into Jerusalem three times a year for the annual feasts. Stories of creation, the Patriarchs, the Exodus and God's faithfulness formed their worldview.

And they clearly knew who their father was. He was God's man. So much so that in v. 1 Solomon took God's commandments to Moses (which is what scholars believe the commandments in this verse refer to) and imparted them to his children as if they were his own. Because his words reflected the law of Almighty God, he knew his commands meant life for his children (read v. 2).

And note the progression from Solomon's admonition in chapter one compared to this one in chapter 3 (read 1:8 & 3:1a). What began as hearing now must not be forgotten. As the rest of 3:1 makes clear, God's wisdom must be deeply felt, practiced, and diligently guarded (read 3:1b). Wisdom in the head isn't enough – it must be embraced, loved and lived out. Verse 3 says essentially the same thing (read). Godly wisdom isn't something you learn like dates for a history exam which are soon forgotten as you move on to something else. Wisdom must be diligently remembered because we never graduate from needing it. It's kind of like my relationship with **my M16** when I was in the Army....As long as you're a soldier, you need to keep your weapon clean, you need a lot of target practice, and you need to keep it close in wartime so you're ready when the enemy appears. In the same way, godly wisdom arms us for the godly life we've been called to – not just at the beginning but until the very end.

That's the logic of Pr. 16:31, "**Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.**" So, in Titus 2:2 Paul writes, "**Let older men be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.**" Here's the point: just because you might be retired from a career and your body's telling you to slow down in a lot of ways, don't slow down in your fear of the Lord; don't back off being holy; don't grow lax in your appreciation for God's grace. In fact, the older we become, the higher and hotter our fire for Christ should burn. When I think of that description, **Ralph Erickson** comes to mind....The first thing Proverbs 3 impresses on us is our need to persevere in God's wisdom.

And when we do that, blessing often follows (read vv. 2 & 4). That's how God wired our world to work. That's reinforced in 3:33-35 (read). God usually blesses those who humbly trust and obey Him. Most of the proverbs in this book operate in the following fashion: "*If you do 'a', all else being equal, 'b' will typically be the result.*" So, it makes sense why Solomon chose to use proverbs to educate his sons. He knew that as they grew into manhood, he wouldn't always be there to guide them, so they needed a set of basic, predictable principles which would usually yield positive results.

For instance, consider 10:3 (read). In general, that's true. Think of **Elijah** – even in a time of extreme drought, God provided for his basic needs. Think of **Israel** in the desert – when they ran out of food, God gave them manna, and when they ran out of water, He gave them water from a rock. Think about **Jesus' words** in Mt. 6:31, "**...do not be anxious saying, 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'** **For...your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you.**" **Illustr:** I think of **a family** in a church we used to attend who beautifully illustrate this....(Capps) Typically, Proverbs 10:3 – and all the other proverbs in this book - hold true.

B. For every rule there is an exception, even with biblical wisdom

But for every rule, there are exceptions. Before we get carried away thinking that these proverbs are like a celestial vending machine: as long as you make wise choices, you'll always get blessed, we need to remember that these are principles, not hard and fast promises. If we don't remember that, we'll likely misapply much of Proverbs, become disillusioned when life gets hard, and be angry with God. Consider Paul in 2 Cor. 11 who lists the various ways he'd suffered for the gospel. One the ways he lists is '**hunger and thirst**'. What's going on here? Did God go back on His Word? No, Pr. 10:3 is a general principle – not a guarantee. And, according to Scripture, there are three reasons why:

The first reason many of the principles in Proverbs don't always hold true is because **we live in a sinful world**. Consider 11:18-19 (read). Last week we considered **Naboth** – the righteous man in 1 Kgs. 21 who refused to sell his vineyard to King Ahab. According to these verses, his righteous refusal to sell his family's land to Ahab should have resulted in reward and life. Instead, it got him slandered and murdered! Why? Because he lived next door to a wicked and powerful man. Sometimes the principles in Proverbs don't happen because, though they reflect God's design, the context in which that design is worked out is warped and wicked.

A second reason the principles of Proverbs don't always hold true is because **we live in a fallen world**. Sometimes our blind spots and non-sinful mistakes hamstring wisdom. It's the reverse of what we find in Pr. 21:15 (read). Last night I read about **3 separate court cases** in which men were convicted of arson-related murders. One man spent 22 years in prison – one was executed – but now the forensic evidence used to convict them has been overturned. All cases of gross injustice, but not because any one was intentionally sinful – just very unfortunate errors judgment. So, why does God allow these breaches of wisdom? Surely, part of the reason is to **feed our hunger for heaven....**

The third reason the principles of Proverbs don't always pan out is because God over-rides them in order to do something greater. Consider a principle of blessing from Deuteronomy (read Deut. 28:1-4). In the context of ancient Israel, God generally blessed those who kept his law with many children. In light of that, how striking is Luke 1:5-7 (read)? But, that was a key part of God's plan....

Though God has woven a general pattern of blessing for obedience into our world, sometimes He intentionally suspends it to remind us that we're not in control. He also does that to remind us that our lives are ultimately about something greater than the predictable blessings of obedience – our lives are about his glory – and sometimes the tapestry of his glory is woven with threads that don't follow the predictable sowing-and-reaping pattern of these proverbs. And a careful reading of v. 4 reminds us that sometimes that's a very good thing (read v. 4).

Note how this verse promises us not just favor with other people, but with **God**. On what basis? Because we've been so pristinely good, kind, and responsible? No. 1 Peter 3:18 gives the answer, "**For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He - that He - might bring us to God....**" Most of the time, the exceptions to Proverbs are a bad thing – like when sin throws a wrench into the mechanics of how God wired our world to work. But here's an exception that should give us deep joy – because of Jesus' saving grace, we don't reap the condemnation we deserve for the sins we've sown. **He** reaps what we've sown. In an ultimate act of wisdom, God the Father suspended the logic of Proverbs so we could be saved.

Solomon began this section teaching us about wise perseverance, and it ends by pointing us toward how it will ultimately happen. As Paul puts it in Philippians 1:6, '**He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the Day of Jesus Christ.**' The only reason any of us will persevere in our faith to the end and finally reach heaven is because, in history's greatest act of wisdom, God introduced the most amazing exception to Proverbs: his name is Jesus. He came to embody the greatest expression of wisdom: saving grace.