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PROVERBS 4: 1 Listen, sons, to a father's instruction. Pay attention and know understanding;

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The preceptor calls his pupils, and tells them how himself was educated, Pro 4:1-4; specifies the teachings he received, Pro 4:5-19; and exhorts his pupil to persevere in well-doing, and to avoid evil, Pro 4:20-27.

Verse 1

Hear, ye children - Come, my pupils, and hear how a father instructed his child. Such as I received from my father I give to you, and they were the teachings of a wise and affectionate parent to his only son, a peculiar object of his regards, and also those of a fond mother.

He introduces the subject thus, to show that the teaching he received, and which he was about to give them, was the most excellent of its kind. By this he ensured their attention, and made his way to their heart. Teaching by precept is good; teaching by example is better; but teaching both by precept and example is best of all.

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PROVERBS 4: 2 for I give you sound learning. Don't forsake my law.

PROVERBS 4: 3 For I was a son to my father, tender and an only child in the sight of my mother.

PROVERBS 4: 4 He taught me, and said to me: "Let your heart retain my words. Keep my commandments, and live.

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Verse 4

He taught me also, and said - Open thy heart to receive my instructions - receive them with affection; when heard, retain and practice them; and thou shalt live - the great purpose of thy being brought into the world shall be accomplished in thee.

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PROVERBS 4: 5 Get wisdom. Get understanding. Don't forget, neither swerve from the words of my mouth.

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Verse 5

Get wisdom - True religion is essential to thy happiness; never forget its teachings, nor go aside from the path it prescribes.

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PROVERBS 4: 6 Don't forsake her, and she will preserve you. Love her, and she will keep you.

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Verse 6

Forsake her not - Wisdom personified is here represented as a guardian and companion, who, if not forsaken, will continue faithful; if loved, will continue a protector.

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PROVERBS 4: 7 Wisdom is supreme. Get wisdom. Yes, though it costs all your possessions, get understanding.

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Verse 7

Wisdom is the principal thing - ראשית חכמה reshith chochmah, "wisdom is the principle." It is the punctum saliens in all religion to know the true God, and what he requires of man, and for what he has made man; and to this must be added, under the Christian dispensation, to know Jesus Christ whom he hath sent, and for what end He was sent, the necessity of his being sent, and the nature of that salvation which he has bought by his own blood.

Get wisdom - Consider this as thy chief gain; that in reference to which all thy wisdom, knowledge, and endeavors should be directed.

And with all thy getting - Let this be thy chief property. While thou art passing through things temporal, do not lose those things which are eternal; and, while diligent in business, be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.

Get understanding - Do not be contented with the lessons of wisdom merely; do not be satisfied with having a sound religious creed; devils believe and tremble; but see that thou properly comprehend all that thou hast learnt; and see that thou rightly apply all that thou hast been taught.

Wisdom prescribes the best end, and the means best calculated for its attainment. Understanding directs to the ways, times, places, and opportunities of practicing the lessons of wisdom. Wisdom points out the thing requisite; understanding sees to the accomplishment and attainment. Wisdom sees; but understanding feels. One discovers, the other possesses.

Coverdale translates this whole verse in a very remarkable manner: "The chefe poynte of wysdome is, that thou be wyllynge to opteyne wysdome; and before all thy goodes to get the understandyng." This is paraphrase, not translation. In this version paraphrase abounds.

The translation in my old MS. Bible is very simple: Begynnyng of wisdam, welle thou wisdom; in al thi wisdam, and in al thi possioun, purchas prudence. He is already wise who seeks wisdom; and he is wise who knows its value, seeks to possess it. The whole of this verse is wanting in the Arabic, and in the best copies of the Septuagint.

Instead of קנה חכמה keneh chochmah, get wisdom, the Complutensian Polyglot has קנה בינה keneh binah, get understanding; so that in it the verse stands, "Wisdom is the principle, get understanding; and in all this getting, get understanding." This is not an error either of the scribe, or of the press, for it is supported by seven of the MSS. of Kennicott and De Rossi.

The Complutensian, Antwerp, and Paris Polyglots have the seventh verse in the Greek text; but the two latter, in general, copy the former.

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PROVERBS 4: 8 Esteem her, and she will exalt you. She will bring you to honour, when you embrace her.

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Verse 8

She shall bring thee to honor - There is nothing, a strict life of piety and benevolence excepted, that has such a direct tendency to reflect honor upon a man, as the careful cultivation of his mind. One of Bacon's aphorisms was, Knowledge is power; and it is truly astonishing to see what influence true learning has. Nothing is so universally respected, provided the learned man be a consistent moral character, and be not proud and overbearing; which is a disgrace to genuine literature.

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PROVERBS 4: 9 She will give to your head a garland of grace. She will deliver a crown of splendour to you."

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Verse 9

A crown of glory - A tiara, diadem, or crown, shall not be more honorable to the princely wearer, than sound wisdom - true religion - coupled with deep learning, shall be to the Christian and the scholar.

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PROVERBS 4: 10 Listen, my son, and receive my sayings. The years of your life will be many.

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Verse 10

The years of thy life shall be many - Vice and intemperance impair the health and shorten the days of the wicked; while true religion, sobriety, and temperance, prolong them. The principal part of our diseases springs from "indolence, intemperance, and disorderly passions." Religion excites to industry, promotes sober habits, and destroys evil passions, and harmonizes the soul; and thus, by preventing many diseases, necessarily prolongs life.

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PROVERBS 4: 11 I have taught you in the way of wisdom. I have led you in straight paths.

PROVERBS 4: 12 When you go, your steps will not be hampered. When you run, you will not stumble.

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Verse 12

Thy steps shall not be straitened - True wisdom will teach thee to keep out of embarrassments. A man under the influence of true religion ponders his paths, and carefully poises occurring circumstances; and as the fear of God will ever lead him to act an upright and honest part, so his way in business and life is both clear and large. He has no by-ends to serve; he speculates not; he uses neither trick nor cunning to effect any purpose. Such a man can never be embarrassed. His steps are

not straitened; he sees his way always plain; and when a favorable tide of Providence shows him the necessity of increased exertion, he runs, and is in no danger of stumbling.

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PROVERBS 4: 13 Take firm hold of instruction. Don't let her go. Keep her, for she is your life.

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Verse 13

Take fast hold - קחזק hachazek, seize it strongly, and keep the hold; and do this as for life. Learn all thou canst, retain what thou hast learnt, and keep the reason continually in view - it is for thy life.

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PROVERBS 4: 14 Don't enter into the path of the wicked. Don't walk in the way of evil men.

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Verse 14

Enter not into the path of the wicked - Never associate with those whose life is irregular and sinful; never accompany them in any of their acts of transgression.

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PROVERBS 4: 15 Avoid it, and don't pass by it. Turn from it, and pass on.

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Verse 15

Avoid it - Let it be the serious purpose of thy soul to shun every appearance of evil.

Pass not by it - Never, for the sake of worldly gain, or through complaisance to others, approach the way that thou wouldst not wish to be found in when God calls thee into the eternal world.

Turn from it - If, through unwatchfulness or unfaithfulness, thou at any time get near or into the way of sin, turn from it with the utmost speed, and humble thyself before thy Maker.

And pass away - Speed from it, run for thy life, and get to the utmost distance; eternally diverging so as never to come near it whilst thou hast a being.

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PROVERBS 4: 16 For they don't sleep, unless they do evil. Their sleep is taken away, unless they make someone fall.

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Verse 16

Except they have done mischief - The night is their time for spoil and depredation. And they must gain some booty, before they go to rest. This I believe to be the meaning of the passage. I grant, also, that there may be some of so malevolent a disposition that they cannot be easy unless they can injure others, and are put to excessive pain when they perceive any man in prosperity, or receiving a kindness. The address in Virgil, to an illnatured shepherd is well known: -

Et cum vidisti puero donata, dolebas:

Et si non aliqua nocuisses, mortuus esses.

Eclog. 3: 14. "When thou sawest the gifts given to the lad, thou wast distressed; and hadst thou not found some means of doing him a mischief, thou hadst died."

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PROVERBS 4: 17 For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence.

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Verse 17

For they eat the bread of wickedness - By privately stealing.

And drink the wine of violence - By highway robbery.

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PROVERBS 4: 18 But the path of the righteous is like the dawning light, that shines more and more until the perfect day.

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Verse 18

But the path of the just - The path of the wicked is gloomy, dark, and dangerous; that of the righteous is open, luminous, and instructive. This verse contains a fine metaphor; it refers to the sun rising above the horizon, and the increasing twilight, till his beams shine full upon the earth. The original, הולך ואור עד נכון היום, holech vaor ad nechon haiyom, may be translated, "going and illuminating unto the prepared day." This seems plainly to refer to the progress of the rising sun while below the horizon; and the gradual increase of the light occasioned by the reflection of his rays by means of the atmosphere, till at last he is completely elevated above the horizon, and then the prepared day has fully taken place, the sun having risen at the determined time. So, the truly wise man is but in his twilight here below; but he is in a state of glorious preparation for the realms of everlasting light; till at last, emerging from darkness and the shadows of death, he is ushered into the full blaze of endless felicity. Yet previously to his enjoyment of this glory, which is prepared for him, he is going - walking in the commandments of his God blameless; and illuminating - reflecting the light of the salvation which he has received on all those who form the circle of his acquaintance.

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PROVERBS 4: 19 The way of the wicked is like darkness. They don't know what they stumble over.

PROVERBS 4: 20 My son, attend to my words. Turn your ear to my sayings.

PROVERBS 4: 21 Let them not depart from your eyes. Keep them in the midst of your heart.

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Verse 21

Keep them in the midst of thine heart - Let them be wrapped up in the very center of thy affections; that they may give spring and energy to every desire, word, and wish.

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PROVERBS 4: 22 For they are life to those who find them, and health to their whole body.

PROVERBS 4: 23 Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it is the wellspring of life.

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Verse 23

Keep thy heart with all diligence - "Above all keeping," guard thy heart. He who knows any thing of himself, knows how apt his affections are to go astray.

For out of it are the issues of life - תוצאות חיים totseoth chaiyim, "the goings out of lives." Is not this a plain allusion to the arteries which carry the blood from the heart through the whole body, and to the utmost extremities? As long as the heart is capable of receiving and propelling the blood, so long life is continued. Now as the heart is the fountain whence all the streams of life proceed, care must be taken that the fountain be not stopped up nor injured. A double watch for its safety must be kept up. So in spiritual things: the heart is the seat of the Lord of life and glory; and the streams of spiritual life proceed from him to all the powers and faculties of the soul. Watch with all diligence, that this fountain be not sealed up, nor these streams of life be cut off. Therefore "put away from thee a froward mouth and perverse lips - and let thy eyes look straight on." Or, in other words, look inwardlook onward - look upward.

I know that the twenty-third verse is understood as principally referring to the evils which proceed from the heart, and which must be guarded against; and the good purposes that must be formed in it, from which life takes its colouring. The former should be opposed; the latter should be encouraged and strengthened. If the heart be pure and holy, all its purposes will be just and good. If it be impure and defiled, nothing will proceed from it but abomination. But though all this be true, I have preferred following what I believe to be the metaphor in the text.

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PROVERBS 4: 24 Put away from yourself a perverse mouth. Put corrupt lips far from you.

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Verse 24

A froward mouth - Beware of hastiness, anger, and rash speeches.

And perverse lips - Do not delight in nor acquire the habit of contradicting and gainsaying; and beware of calumniating and backbiting your neighbor.

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PROVERBS 4: 25 Let your eyes look straight ahead. Fix your gaze directly before you.

PROVERBS 4: 26 Make the path of your feet level. Let all of your ways be established.

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Verse 26

Ponder the path of thy feet - Weigh well the part thou shouldst act in life. See that thou contract no bad habits.

PROVERBS 4: 27 Don't turn to the right hand nor to the left. Remove your foot from evil.

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Verse 27

Turn not to the right hand nor to the left - Avoid all crooked ways. Be an upright, downright, and straight-forward man. Avoid tricks, wiles, and deceptions of this kind.

To this the Septuagint and Vulgate add the following verse: Αυτος δε ορθας ποιησει τας τροχιας σου, τας δε πορειας σου εν ειρηνη προαξει. Ipse autem rectos faciet cursus tuos; itinera autem tua in pace producet. "For himself will make thy paths straight and thy journeyings will he conduct in prosperity." The Arabic has also a clause to the same effect. But nothing like this is found in the Hebrew, Chaldee, or Syriac; nor in the Vulgate, as printed in the Complutensian Polyglot; nor in that of Antwerp or of Paris; but it is in the Greek text of those editions, in the editio princeps of the Vulgate, in five of my own MSS., and in the old MS. Bible. De Lyra rejects the clause as a gloss that stands on no authority. If an addition, it is certainly very ancient; and the promise it contains is true whether the clause be authentic or not.