

**Get Smart**  
Studies in the book of *Proverbs*  
**How to Build Something for Your Kids**

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**Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

*Get Smart: How to Build Something for Your Kids*

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## **Background Notes**

**Scriptures:** Prov. 14:26-27; Psalm 40

## **Introduction**

Wisdom builds things which last. Jesus told his familiar parable to underscore that fact:

24 Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it (Matthew 7:24-27).

These words draw from the rich wisdom tradition found in places like the book of *Proverbs* which we have been studying during the past several weeks. The “wise man” is one who hears, does, and builds wisely. What such a person accomplishes does not “fall” because it is “founded on the rock.” Throughout *Proverbs* we have heard the wisdom writer tell his audience to “hear and do.” The result will be something stable, reliable, and permanent.

Children need things in their lives which are stable, reliable, and permanent. The Christian family ought to be the first sanctuary of young human life. Within the safety of such a place, children grow and thrive. In 1975 I was deeply impacted by Edith Schaeffer’s book, *What is A Family?*<sup>1</sup> She carefully enumerated the essential elements under the following chapter titles:

1. A Changing Life Mobile.
2. An Ecologically Balanced Environment.
3. The Birthplace of Creativity.
4. A Formation Center for Human Relationships.
5. A Shelter in the Time of Storm.
6. A Perpetual Relay of Truth.
7. An Economic Unit.
8. An Educational Unit.
9. A Museum of Memories.
10. A Door That Has Hinges and a Lock.
11. Blended Balances.

I was particularly impressed by chapter 10 which emphasized the safety of living inside such a home. Children need a place where they can express their deepest feelings, vent their frustrations, let down their hair, practice being different kinds of people, and have rich conversations with their parents and each other. The door of such a home has hinges which allow it to open and close — nobody is trapped inside, but the controlling handle is inside. The door has a lock — there are times when only the family belongs inside. Within the context of loving security, true building can take place. Here is the place for teaching, discipline, learning self-control, nourishment, and growth. And here is where children learn what God is truly like. For God also has a house

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<sup>1</sup> Currently released by Baker Books.

which He is building, and the family is an important room in that bigger, more comprehensive building project called “The People of God.”

Wisdom is the guardian of such a house. In this week’s study, we want to look at one last theme from the book of *Proverbs*, and it has to do with “building something for your kids.” Perhaps the relationship of parent and child gets more treatment in *Proverbs* than in any other single book of the Bible. Repeatedly we hear the father addressing his son, and he fondly does so with the words “my son,” a phrase appearing 23 times throughout the book, while the single word “son” occurs some 44 times. From the outset, we are keenly aware of the family context for what the wise writer tells us, as Solomon, the primary contributor, is called “son of David” before he is called “king of Israel” (1:1). In the ancient Hebrew culture, the father was the representative of the entire household, and his relationship to his children was essential for their personal formation as human beings. They were, after all, the future. Building up children was building for the future. Society thought in terms of “generations” which sometimes stretched into “third and fourth” instances (see Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9). When wisdom guides the parenting process, a hopeful future awaits us, embodied in the lives of our children.

### **Houses, Good and Bad**

It was the poet Edgar Guest who wrote, “It takes a heap of livin’ to make a house a home.” Nobody contests this sentiment, especially that a house is not necessarily a home. We might want to dress that saying up a bit: “It takes a heap of wisdom to make a house a home.” Guest was pretty clear about what went into the recipe for a genuine home, not the least was the idea that “yer soul is sort o’ wrapped round everything.” He went on, “Ye’ve got to sing an’ dance fer years, ye’ve got t’ romp and play...” And yes, the home must be “sanctified,” and be the place were babies are born, children are brought up good, and “grown into yer heart.” But also, home is the place where tears are shed for a host of reasons, especially when Death’s angel comes. “These are the scenes that grip the heart,” he reminds us, thanks to “pleasant memories.” Some who read Guest’s poem may think he’s just too sentimental and “down home” for their liking. The cockney English might wear on us, but the poet makes his point.

From the poets of Israel comes the fundamental principle:

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain (Psalm 127:1).

Applied to parents and children this might read: “Unless the Lord builds the family, parents labor in vain.” The wisdom writer comments on the status of the home where God is the builder. Conversely, he warns about the perils of the house where folly lives. One key passage in this regard is part of the larger anthem in praise of wisdom found in Proverbs 9. Lady Wisdom stands in stark contrast to Lady Folly:

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. <sup>2</sup> She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table. <sup>3</sup> She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town, <sup>4</sup> "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks sense she says, <sup>5</sup> "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. <sup>6</sup> Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight." <sup>7</sup> Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. <sup>8</sup> Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. <sup>9</sup> Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning. <sup>10</sup> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. <sup>11</sup> For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life. <sup>12</sup> If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; if you scoff, you alone will bear it. <sup>13</sup> The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. <sup>14</sup> She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, <sup>15</sup> calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way, <sup>16</sup> "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" And to him who lacks sense she says, <sup>17</sup> "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." <sup>18</sup> But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Notice the leading statement: “Wisdom has built her house...” (9:1). The verb form in Hebrew underscores the complete and lasting nature of the action “built.” This is no temporary dwelling thrown together from flimsy materials, assembled by careless workmen, and according to poor design. Each action ascribed to wisdom carries the same weight: “has hewn,” “has slaughtered,” “has mixed,” “has set,” and “has sent.” Nothing wisdom does is an afterthought or mere improvisation. Wisdom builds her home “in the way of insight” and in

“the fear of the Lord” where all her work “begins.” For such a home, “days are multiplied” and “years will be added.”

By contrast, Lady Folly is a seductress. She acts only in the moment and “knows nothing.” “At the door of her house” or “in the highest places” of civic life she appeals to those “passing by.” She builds nothing lasting or permanent, but attracts to her house persons who “lack sense.” It is not wisdom which guides her efforts, but sentimental platitudes (as in 9:17). As a result of following her, human beings do not find a home but become guests “in the depths of Sheol” — that is, the house of Death.

*Proverbs* has more to say about the wise conduct of house and home, as well as warnings about the pitfalls when the wicked manage the household. Consider these passages:

The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous (3:33).

... be delivered from the forbidden woman ... who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God; <sup>18</sup> for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed; <sup>19</sup> none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life (2:18)

<sup>8</sup> Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house, <sup>9</sup> lest you give your honor to others and your years to the merciless, <sup>10</sup> lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labors go to the house of a foreigner, <sup>11</sup> and at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, <sup>12</sup> and you say, "How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof!" (5:8-12).

<sup>7</sup> The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous will stand (12:7).

The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down (14:1).

The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish (14:11).

In the house of the righteous there is much treasure, but trouble befalls the income of the wicked (15:6).

The LORD tears down the house of the proud but maintains the widow's boundaries (15:25).

Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife (17:1)

If anyone returns evil for good, evil will not depart from his house (17:13).

It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife (21:9; 25:24).

The Righteous One observes the house of the wicked; he throws the wicked down to ruin (21:12).

Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it (21:20).

By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; <sup>4</sup> by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches (24:3-4).

Lie not in wait as a wicked man against the dwelling of the righteous; do no violence to his home; <sup>16</sup> for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity (24:15-16).

Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house (24:27).

With confidence, the writer declares “the house of the righteous will stand.” We are also reminded that both wise men *and* wise women share in the building of the stable home. Warnings about “strife” within the home accompany reminders about not being a person who is “quarrelsome.” Though it seems the “wife” gets the short end of the stick in this analysis, remember the perspective of the ancient world: patriarchal. Then, notice how the “building” of the house is followed by its being “established.” The flourishing family requires daily commitment to cultivate and enrich the lives of its members. Further, the home of the righteous can rely on

God's protection; the enemy of the righteous must not "do violence" to the godly home. God promises to raise up the righteous when they fall, but offers no such encouragement to the wicked. Having a godly home, based on wisdom, means "getting everything ready." Building a Christian home is not a matter of chance or chaos, but the result of intentional and purposeful planning.

### Home: Refuge for Children

As noted in the *Introduction*, the Christian home is to be a place where security and spiritual thriving takes place. One of our main texts, Proverbs 14:26-27, underscores this fact:

<sup>26</sup> In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge. <sup>27</sup> The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death.

Two distinct Hebrew words characterize the sense of security brought by the "fear of the Lord" in this passage.

1. The term *mibtāh* is based on the root idea of "trust, confidence, security." In its cognate forms is present the idea of "being stretched out, taut," thus implying, "firm and solid." Used in this way, confidence derives from the strength of something else — in this case, from God. Trust is only as reliable as its *object*. That is why the wisdom writer connects "the fear of the Lord" with this supreme confidence. If we take the key idea learned from *Proverbs* that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," we can see that wisdom is God's instrument for instilling confidence in the lives of His people.
2. The second term is *maḥseh* with its primary meaning of "shelter, refuge." This word involves more concrete action in the face of an emergency. Applications include: rainstorm, the sun, and military threats. One prominent place for refuge is the hill or the mountain which provides a hiding-place. God is the "strong rock or fortress." Other forms of refuge are "wings, shield, or temple." Persons seeking refuge readily choose such places, confident that they will be safe.

From the phrase "his children" (14:26) we infer all of God's people, but the further relevance to children within a family is also possible. Through His wisdom, which starts with "the fear of the Lord," God provides security and a safe place for vulnerable children. In practical terms this suggests what the home should become for all God's children, young or old: a reliable refuge where they may confidently find a place when danger approaches.

The New Testament expands the meaning of "refuge" in light of Jesus and the Gospel:

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Prior to this verse, the writer tells his audience that Jesus, our High Priest, has gone into the heavens in order to represent our needs before God. He is called a sympathetic priest because of his sufferings as a human being; these allow him to identify with us. Armed with this knowledge, we have confidence that God's throne has become the place of "mercy and grace" and the source of "help in our time of need." In Jesus Christ, adults and children can find confidence and refuge — a place to call home.

Continuing his thought in 14:27, the wisdom writer promises "the fountain of life" and diversion from "the snares of death." Children are hope for the future, and are, in one sense, a *fountain of life*. Such confidence is not automatic, however. Insofar as children have wisdom as their friend and guide, they anchor civilization for at least one more generation. Losing the children to folly, the human race surrenders its grip on tomorrow. Fountains require a faithful source of water in order to bring life. In this case, "fear of the Lord" supplies the required reservoir for children. The "fountain of life" theme echoes throughout the book:

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked (10:11).

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death (13:14).

Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools (16:22).

The words of a man's mouth are deep waters, but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook (18:4).

These passages tell us *how* the fountain reaches the parched lips of thirsty souls. By the “mouth of the righteous” God pours forth the revelation of His truth to others. That is, the Word of God, spoken by the people of God becomes the unfailing well of life. Jesus said something similar to this in John 6:63: “The words I speak to you are spirit and life.” Jesus himself is called “the word of life” (1 John 1:1). Paul instructed his churches to “hold fast to the word of life” (Philippians 2:16). How significant is this teaching to the rearing of children! Early and often our children should hear the word of God read, explained and lived. Just as food is nourishment to a child’s physical development, so the Word of God feeds the child’s soul. Human words are important, to be sure, but they are, as the wisdom writer says, “deep waters” (18:4) — that is, treacherous and unknown. Our words are fallible, and our teaching is often off the mark. Human wisdom, like deep waters, is dark, murky and may overwhelm a child. God’s wisdom is designed to be accessible to those who, with openness and trust, come ready to receive it. Deep waters and a bubbling brook are quite different from each other. The bubbling brook flows above ground and constantly renews itself. Deep waters are largely hidden and may stagnate. God’s word, like the fountain, bubbles up with fresh energy and new meaning each time we hear it. It never grows stale nor are its words ever irrelevant. Children may come to this fountain and find life.

The Hebrew poet, in Psalm 36:9, renders this idea in personal terms:

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

Here is sound counsel to parents as they explain the things of God to their offspring. Point children to a *personal relationship* with God, and they will discover the fountain of life. When the prophet Jeremiah witnessed the fall of his beloved nation, Judah, he knew why it had happened:

For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:13).

O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water (Jeremiah 17:13).

Dust or water: The contrast could not be sharper! The Lord is “the fountain of *living* water,” and turning away from him cuts us off from the source of life. Sadly, those who lose the source attempt a poor substitute. In ancient Israel where water was a precious commodity, people would dig cisterns in the ground so that they might store the occasional rainfall. Unfortunately, the parched ground would crack, and the water would run out. In similar ways, God’s people had turned to their own efforts to satisfy their souls. The result was failure and loss of hope. Only in God can we find a reliable supply of life-renewing water. Our children need to see the inadequacy and experience authentic shame from godless ways of finding true life.

Shame, says the writer, results from forsaking the Lord. In homes, shame is a delicate form of disapproval, and parents must handle it with care. God calls upon us to build our children up, not tear them down. The use of shame as a weapon to control children is not only dangerous, it has long-term consequences. Used frivolously, shame damages a child’s self-esteem and her sense of worth. Acts of excessive provocation are not part of caring discipline. The New Testament offers these guidelines to parents:

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged (Colossians 3:21).

Children should be taught to regard dishonor in the sight of God as the highest form of shame. What God thinks about us counts for much more than what human beings think about us. Ultimately, John tells us in his first letter:

And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming (1 John 2:28).

Further, children must be taught how to avoid bringing shame on others. Consider these insights from *Proverbs*:

He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a son of shame (10:5).

He who robs his father and drives out his mother is a son who brings shame and disgrace (19:26).

The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother (29:15).

A proper sense of shame surrounds a child with politeness, appropriateness, and consideration for others. False shame is demeaning, disheartening, and damaging. Parents should never shame their children, but they should cultivate a proper sense shame in the presence of a holy God.

## Parents and Children<sup>2</sup>

Earlier in these notes, we cited Psalms 127:1 which reminded us that God must be the true builder of the house if the finished product is to last. God is, after all, the craftsman of “wondrous works” in His creation (see Job 37:14). Wisdom accompanies God, metaphorically, as His “master workman,” the daily companion of all that He does (Proverbs 8:30). Children are among the delightful furnishings of God’s home, and the Psalmist further declares:

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward (Psalm 127:3).

In this two-line verse, the poet borrows imagery from the world of investments and applies it to the insurmountable value of children in the home. Three pivotal words unify this text. In each case, something “rich” enhances our understanding of children:

1. **Heritage.** The Hebrew word is *nahalāh*, the common term for “possession, property, inheritance, portion, or share.” Inherent in this expression is the idea of *permanence*. Inheritance is one way to experience the lasting quality of something: it gets passed along from one generation to another, and it is not lost along the way. In the ancient world, real property (land, etc.) had this abiding feature. From God’s perspective, the whole world is His inheritance, since it permanently belongs to Him, the One who made it (Psalm 47:4; Deuteronomy 32:8ff; Exodus 15:17). In turn, God “gave” the land of Canaan to His people as an inheritance. Israel never really owned the land, but were tenants to the Great King of Creation, Yahweh. However, God allowed land to flow from one generation to another.

God saw His people as His inheritance in a way far superior to the mere possession of real estate. Conversely, God was to be the inheritance of Israel — that is, their abiding and constant supply, meeting all of their needs (Deuteronomy 19:10, 14; 26:1; Jeremiah 10:16; 51:19; Ezekiel 48:29).

The Psalmist, adhering to the same logic, applies the image of the inheritance to children. They are especially called “a heritage from the Lord.” Why inheritance? The image points to the future and makes an implicit promise that God will continue His work in the world through each new generation born there. Parents thereby become stewards of the future by being responsible for the nurture of their children. Like Hannah (see 1 Samuel 1-2) — who asked for a child from the Lord and then promised to give him back to the Lord all the days of his life — parents acknowledge their gratitude to God for giving them their children. Ancient Jewish parents would no more consider abortion than they would other acts of gratuitous killing. They had no right to take the life of the unborn because it was an inheritance from God — the down-payment on His future work. To terminate a pregnancy is equivalent to depriving God’s world of a possible future.

2. **Fruit.** Itself a metaphor, this word recognizes that children are not a product of human manufacture but the divinely given gift of God’s creative process. Life and its reproduction remained a mystery for the ancient people of God. They stood in awe of the formation of life in the womb (see Psalm 139), and they saw it as the masterful work of God’s creative wisdom.
3. **Reward.** From the Hebrew, *sākār*, “hire, wages.” This is the common term used for compensation — payment for services rendered. Its use in Psalm 127:3 is, in some ways, a bit odd. In what sense are children like wages? Certainly God does not intend us to see children in crassly monetary terms. However, that is the genius of applying this word to God’s gift of children. The psalmist wants the audience to place a higher value on children than even the wages received for work done. In that culture, wages were not particularly large, but they were nonetheless precious — the stuff from which a life could be made. How much more rewarding, pens the poet, are children. Wages are earned and quickly spent. Children are an investment in the future, and they will last beyond our own brief life-

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<sup>2</sup> Again, Wiersbe helps us put some polish on our treatment of this subject.

span. Israel soberly treated their children as part of a generational progression: "...third and fourth generation" was the usual way for referring to the continuity of family influence. It also threw the spotlight on the importance of carefully tending the lives of children who will shape the future! Failure to do so leads to the perpetuation of twisted values and devalued lives.

We'd like to focus on three normative values applied to the stewardship of children. Each one finds ample support in the *Proverbs* collection. Our thoughts are suggestive, and leave the reader plenty of room to develop and apply them to their particular parenting situation.

### **1. Parents are to be an Example to their Children**

The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him (20:7).

Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her (31:28).

He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge (14:26).

Fathers and mothers share the challenge of being examples to their children. Consistency lies at the heart of a good example. Children need reliable parents who see their role as full-time Christians. The adage, "Do as I say, not as I do"<sup>3</sup> is rubbish and has no place in the Christian home. If Christ "left us an example to follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21), and if Paul could invite his churches to follow his example (Philippians 3:17), can we offer our children anything less?

The wisdom writer honors the righteous man who "leads a blameless life" precisely because his children are "blessed after him." The emphasis falls on the words "after him" which have a distinctive exemplary quality about them. From a mother, children witness blessed qualities as well, and her husband praises her for them. Then, as we noted early in this study, 14:26 commends the home where children find a refuge precisely because their parents fear the Lord. The phrase "God-fearing home" has become a familiar one. It identifies the way of life truly lived out to be imitated by children.

### **Parents are to be the Primary Instructors of their Children**

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching (1:8; 6:20).

Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge (19:27).

My son, keep my words and store up my commands within you (7:1).

<sup>12</sup> and you say, "How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! <sup>13</sup> I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors (5:12-13).

A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother (10:1).

A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish man despises his mother (15:20).

<sup>15</sup> My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad. <sup>16</sup> My inmost being will exult when your lips speak what is right ... <sup>24</sup> The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who fathers a wise son will be glad in him. <sup>25</sup> Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice. (23:15-16, 25-26).

Be wise, my son, and make my heart glad, that I may answer him who reproaches me (27:11).

He who loves wisdom makes his father glad, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth (29:3).

A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke (13:1).

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<sup>3</sup> The quote in essentially this form comes from the 14<sup>th</sup> century renaissance figure, Giovanni Boccaccio.

The book of *Proverbs* largely reflects a father's loving instruction of his son. Frequently the writer addresses "My son" before setting forth some timely truth for him to follow. Both parents play significant roles in the instructional process. From the selected passages above, we hear repeatedly that the child should "listen, keep, store up, be wise, love wisdom, and hear instruction." Positive results flow from adhering to these admonitions, including gladness of heart for both parent and child. Warnings accompany instructions, especially about not listening and squandering what is heard. Certainly parents pray that their children will remain faithful to what they have learned. But *Proverbs* does not rule out "going astray" from sound teaching. Indeed, children can be "foolish" through their hatred of discipline and despising of reproof. How many parents have experienced deep grief because their children refused to follow parental instruction!

What are we to make of the "wayward child" who spurns instruction? We might want to remember the situation in the Garden of Eden: Was not God the first parent? Did He not faithfully instruct His children in the way of life and warn them about the path of death? Yet, knowing they possessed free will, He did not force His will on them, but inviting them to voluntary obedience to His commands. The result: they turned away from instruction and followed the foolish path. The rest is history. Was God a "bad father" because His children disobeyed? Hardly. In the same way, we may faithfully follow the guidance of Scripture and instruct our children, but they may still choose not to obey. Sinning human beings brought sadness to the heart of God. His response was to remain committed to their well-being, offering them forgiveness and refusing to reject them. It is true that God the Father needed to turn them out from the place of perfection, but that did not mean He disowned them as His children. Instead, He put them on the path to ultimate redemption.

For parents, the dealings of God with His children in Eden should be a source of encouragement. Surely we can't do better than God! That said, we are called upon to be faithful to our children, pray for them, encourage them, love them, and hope for their eventual repentance and change.

## **2. Parents are to Lovingly Discipline their Children**

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it (22:6).

<sup>11</sup> My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, <sup>12</sup> for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights (3:11-12).

Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him (13:24).

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him (22:15).

Discipline your son, for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death (19:18).

<sup>13</sup> Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. <sup>14</sup> If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol (23:13-14).

The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother. Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart (29:15, 17).

Perhaps the first passage in the group above is among the most familiar verses in *Proverbs*. In order to build confidence as parents, we may turn to this text for a guarantee. It's only natural to think that all our parenting efforts receive the reward of obedience, moral and righteous children. The phrase "when he is old" somehow comforts us that all our efforts will pay off *someday*. Of course, by the time our kids reach old age, we'll be gone from the scene. Is it realistic to imagine that good parenting alone is sufficient to secure a favorable moral life for our kids? Experience tells us that faithful parents can face rebellious offspring at critical moments in their development. Whether it's the expected challenge of the teen years or persistent peer pressure, the path of young people may be less than straight. Those events aren't evidence that the proverb is untrue. So what does it mean?

As a first-year Hebrew student many years ago, I read first-hand what the wisdom writer had written. To my surprise, the meaning of this verse was not as it had commonly been construed. The key phrase “in the way he should go” literally means “according to the measure of his way” or “in accordance with his way.” The Hebrew word *darkô*, “his way,” refers to the sort of temperament or “wiring” specific to the child. Parents need to carefully study and discover what sort of natural constitution their child possesses. The differences among children in the same family can be striking, and attentive parents learn how to work with each of their children “according to their way.” Outgoing, super-active personalities require special treatment, as do quiet, reflective types. We mustn’t assume that in parenting, “one size fits all.” Kids don’t fall from a cookie cutter. God made our children in ways which complement the full range of human personality, temperament, and ability. While God’s principles for parenting don’t change and His rules for a godly life remain constant, we must apply them *wisely to the children God gave us*. We are likely to be more successful in rearing godly children if we learn to adapt our discipline to their unique features. Failure to do so can lead to both frustrated parents and discouraged children.

“Know your child” ought to precede “train your child.” Since children don’t arrive on the scene with instructional manuals, it’s up to us to seek godly insight into their special qualities and then consistently train them with the principles from God’s word.

So what is “discipline” as *Proverbs* uses the term?

1. The word “train” appears in 22:6. It comes from the Hebrew term *hānak* which means either “train” or “dedication, consecrate.” Ordinarily this word refers to the dedication of a house, but its most basic idea is “to inaugurate or begin” something. The notions of “start” and “initiate” are prominent in this word. Parents should make certain that their children are given the best possible “start” in life. Good beginnings are important, and it is never too soon to shape the direction of a child’s life. Moreover, based on our comments above, learning the special qualities in a child’s personality *early in their development* increases the success of the parenting process.
2. We also encounter the word “discipline” derived from the Hebrew expression *mûsar* (noun) which is based on the verb form *yāsar*. The history of Israel includes the “discipline of Yahweh” which molded and shaped His people into a unique and genuine reflection of Himself. At least that was the intended goal of the discipline. Frequently, God needed to “correct” His people by allowing them to experience the rigors of life, such as the forty years spent in the wilderness before they were allowed to live in the land of Canaan. Such discipline happened in the context of Yahweh’s *covenant* with His people — that special legal bond which connected Israel to God and to each other. Within the covenant, God gave commands, made promises, warned of consequences, and gave blessings. In turn, God’s people were to listen, obey, and worship Him with grateful hearts. God saw Israel as children, and loved them as a Father. A famous text in this regards comes from *Deuteronomy*:

The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers. <sup>2</sup> And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. <sup>3</sup> And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. <sup>4</sup> Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. <sup>5</sup> **Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you.** <sup>6</sup> So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him. (8:1-6).

The theological basis for an earthly parent's discipline of a child is in the *covenant*. Parents bear the image of their covenant Lord, and as such stand in parallel relationship to their children: chastening, correcting, instructing, and providing — which are expressions of an interpersonal relationship of love. So also are the thirty usages in *Proverbs* and elsewhere, where the words for discipline are said to come from Yahweh: "for whom the Lord loves, even as a father the son in whom he delights." Hence, discipline gives assurance of

child-ship, for *mûsar* primarily points to a God-centered way of life, and only secondarily to ethical behavior. Proverbs 1:7 couples it with the "fear of Yahweh," and 1:8 with *tôrāh* — "instruction, teaching." Hence, also the preciousness of *mûsar* (8:10) and the reason why fools despise it (15:5, 32). *Proverbs* and other wisdom literature speak of discipline with emphasis on instruction. It is tempting to see that the seemingly disparate notions of correction and instruction converge beautifully only in the covenant.<sup>4</sup>

Covenant implies *relationship*. Having a solid relationship with one's children is a pre-requisite to effective discipline. Love, respect, and honor precede discipline. Failure to see discipline working in our children's lives may well hinge on deficiencies in this area. Parents should work on relationship while they apply the discipline. Eventually children get the impression that the discipline comes from a caring heart not a vindictive one. If severe consequences for bad behavior have love and care as their context, the outcome in the child's life will be richer and more long-lasting. That was God's method, and we can hardly improve on it!

3. Discipline entails both instruction and correction. The *how to* must be accompanied by the *what if*. Few people get things right the first time they're told how to do them. Correction isn't a mean-spirited exercise, but it is a necessary one if children are to learn. How will children know to fix their mistakes if they are not told about them? God never hesitated pointing out the error of Israel's ways in His efforts to create a righteous and holy people out of them.

Correction is often associated with "the rod" in the Bible. This has raised the anxiety level of some parents. There's plenty of evidence that parents physically abuse their children. We can be assured that the Bible does not intend to encourage such abuse. In the group of texts above, we have 19:18 which warns, "do not set your heart on putting him to death." At the same time we are puzzled by "the rod of discipline" which "drives folly far from" the child. Somehow seeing the word "drive" conjures up images of child abuse. The fact that we have these concerns is a good thing: God wants us to "rightly handle the Word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15), which includes not finding meanings there He did not intend to communicate.

One helpful way of understanding the metaphor of "the rod" is to recall Psalm 23. In it God reveals Himself to the psalmist as the shepherd of Israel. At one point in the psalm, the writer says, "Your rod and your staff comfort me." These items (rod and staff) were common equipment for the shepherd in the course of tending his flock. The "rod" (Hebrew: *šēbet*) was the shepherd's implement used in counting sheep. As each sheep passed under the rod it was raised and then lowered, like a turnstile, and the count incremented by one. The "staff" (Hebrew: *miš'eneth*) was a hooked instrument for pulling wayward sheep from treacherous places where they had fallen. Both implements are said to "comfort" (Hebrew: *nāham*) the sheep. In the case of the staff, the sheep had gotten itself into difficulty, and the shepherd's skillful actions restored it to safety once more. By using the rod, the shepherd revealed his commitment to account for every sheep in his flock, leaving no one out. This attentiveness to detail and personal concern gave the sheep a sense of security.

Applied to discipline, the rod and staff imagery has the same effect. Just as Yahweh uses the rod and staff to secure His people, so the caring parent does the same for children. In addition, the rod had a further function: to drive away anything that might attack the sheep: it was a weapon used against the enemy of the flock. Children have enemies, and among them (according to 22:15) is the "folly in their heart." The rod symbolizes those acts of discipline which drive folly from the child's heart. There is no need to imagine that in order to do that a parent must mercilessly beat his children. Since the rod is a defensive weapon, we might more accurately see the child's enemies — not the child — as the object of the rod's blows. Whenever parents rise to protect their children, they are taking hold of the rod and using it for its intended purpose. Until children are old enough to stand up to "the world, the flesh, and the devil," parents must do it for them.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul R. Gilchrist, "yāsar," *TWOT*.

Rod-like discipline is consistent and true, comes from the legitimate authority of parents, sets boundaries, and encourages necessary change. Ultimately, God uses the metaphor of “the rod” to refer to His Word (Isaiah 11:4) as “the rod of His mouth.” Such discipline is righteous and in keeping with God’s plan for all human beings, not just children.

4. The goal of discipline is the salvation of our children. This is the message of 23:13-14 which speaks of “saving his soul from Sheol” — that is, from ultimate physical and spiritual death. Teaching children the truth about sin and salvation lies at the heart of Christian discipline. The goal is to lead our children into a life-long relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Along that journey is the discovery of how deadly sin can be, how destructive disobedience is, and how serious turning away from correction becomes in a child’s life. Personal discipline of our children can be a powerful object lesson of God’s dealing with us. One day our children will be “on their own” and needing to respond, not to our discipline, but to God’s. That is the day of the parenting “hand-off” when we let go of our children and place them finally under the firm guidance of God. This text from *Hebrews* clarifies that transition:

<sup>5</sup> And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. <sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." <sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (12:5-11).

“That we might share in His holiness” is a powerful goal for God’s children to attain. It also belongs to the long-term perspective of parents as they adapt their disciplinary methods to the best interests of their children. If God becomes the ultimate parent in our children’s lives, does it not make sense to imitate His work in the discipline of our children?

### **The Ten Lessons for Children from Proverbs**

As we come to the end of our brief sampling of material from *Proverbs*, presented during these past several weeks, we might glean some of the more relevant principles applicable to *building something for our children*. What follows is an excerpted list of key themes throughout the book. In the main, they apply to all of us, but in particular, they have special importance in aiming our children toward their adulthood. That is, after all, the goal of parenting: to train children to become fully functioning, thriving, and mature adults who are independent of us but fully dependent on God. We should teach our children:

1. To have a healthy fear of God (1:7; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26-27; 15:16; 16:6; 19:23).
2. To guard their minds (4:23; 23:7).
3. To obey their parents (1:8; 4:1-4; 6:20-23; 30:17).
4. To carefully select their companions (1:11-18; 2:10-15; 13:20).
5. To control their sinful desires (2:16-19; 5:3-5; 6:23-33; 7:6-27).
6. To enjoy sexual fidelity (5:15-20).
7. To watch their words (4:24; 10:11, 19-21, 32; 12:18, 22; 15:1-2; 16:23; 20:15).
8. To pursue their work (6:6-11; 10:4-5; 22:29).
9. To manage their money (3:9-10; 11:24-26; 19:17; 22:9).
10. To love their neighbors (3:27-29; 25:21-22).

### **Conclusion**

Jennifer Hazlet had absolutely no idea what she was doing. It was one of those days. She fumbled with the plastic edges of the funny smelling diapers. Baby Benjamin wasn’t too impressed with her skills. After all this

time, she had no excuse. His whimper became a scream loud enough to peel the pretty decals off the freshly painted nursery. She sighed and wished her mother was still alive. *It's not fair!* Deep inside, her heart pounded with a mixture of terror and anger. Far away in Afghanistan, her husband fought the Taliban. *Good for him. Maybe I'll send him a diaper.* She didn't mean it, but couldn't help the feeling exploding all around her. Half-way through her pregnancy the orders came, and Elliot did his duty for God and country. *Who does their duty for mom and baby?*

The knock at the door startled her. For a time she laid aside the frustration and bundled up her little prince as best she could. *Hope the tape holds.* Managing the distance to the front door, she wiggled open the lock. Standing at the entrance was her new neighbor, laden with bundles of her own. *Twins. Dear God, I can't even imagine...* Valerie knew plenty about child care, as she held numbers four and five.

“Busy?” The question felt like acid in her face. *What does she think?*

“Like a flea in a skillet.” It was Dad's old cliché — one of the few memories that warmed her heart these days.

“Good one, kiddo!” *Another zinger. Alright, I'm young, inexperienced, and alone. Don't remind me. Give me a break.* “Care for some company? Eeny and Meeny are wide awake and in a good mood. Rare timing.” *Rare indeed. Whereas I have no good timing at all.*

Although she couldn't put her finger on it, Valerie projected something comforting and relaxed. Jennifer needed that, even if it didn't make any sense under the circumstances. Esther and Michael (their real names) were nearly the same age as Ben. Double the pleasure, she thought to herself. Double something!

During the next hour, as chit chat gave way to baby talk, Jennifer made a discovery. It's possible to be a mother and not stop being a human being. She needed to feel that. Oddly, Valerie never once commented on the way Jennifer fumbled with the baby's blanket, or how she held the bottle. Beneath the seasoned grace of motherhood was a strong yet tender love for the twins. “Gifts from God, you know. Good as gold. Tomorrow's hope. My best investment in the future.” When Valerie spoke, it was like the arms of Jennifer's mother wrapped around her. She couldn't explain it. Yes, she missed hubby Daniel — missed him desperately. But loneliness gave way to another feeling she couldn't describe — or name.

“You never forget your first one.” Hearing the word “first” made Jennifer shudder. You think I plan to have more? “Every one is different. You grow to be an expert all over again. How they look at you. Their funny faces. I like those best. They're different too. I could tell them apart just from their faces.”

*Nobody told me about such things. I'm such a social klutz.* “So, did your other babies grow up like their faces?” She couldn't believe how silly that sounded, but the words tumbled out. Valerie made it easy to say just about anything.

“Funny you should say that ...” For the next hour Jennifer was treated with tales from the nursery, the sandbox, the wading pool, the swing-set, the preschool, the emergency room, and beyond. She lost track of the stories. Her neighbor kept coming back to a single theme: kids are here on purpose; there are no accidental children, no matter what people tell you. It all sounded — well, so religious. Maybe that was her problem. There was no “big story” for baby Ben and her — just diapers, sleepless nights, stomach aches, diapers, crying, diapers... She knew Valerie had plenty of those things too. But she had them with a difference.

“Know your kids, know the story God has shown you in their little personalities, and listen to His Word.” It might have sounded rather preachy from just about anyone else. Not from Valerie. Valerie had five up on her one. “Now, tell me about Ben. What's his story so far?” They talked for short while about Ben's diapers, sleepless nights...

Valerie arose to leave. “School will be out, soon. Got to get home. Oh, I almost forgot. Here’s some food for the body and the soul. You’ll get fat eating the strudel — Mama’s recipe. The other one — well I never seem to get enough of it. No calories there.”

Jennifer glanced at the small booklet. *Proverbs* for Mothers. Hmm. A strange familiarity scented the air as she flipped the pages with her free hand. A few lines were highlighted. Something different, that’s for sure. “Looks interesting...” Valerie left, Eeny and Meeny well in hand.

Time passed and the house became empty again. Just her and Ben. A bit more tolerable, perhaps. She looked at her little golden boy shifting himself inside the blanket, making that ‘you’ve got to be kidding’ face which ended with a relieved miniature smile. Gas. She also smiled as she laid him in the crib. Sitting quietly in the rocking chair, she found herself looking at him with a fresh imagination. Then, after a few minutes, she decided, I think I’ll write Daniel and tell him what Ben did today. She laid the little booklet by the crib, stroking the cover thoughtfully. She stared at it for along time, flipped the pages again. No pictures. Hope the story is good.

§

The last chapter of *Proverbs* celebrates woman as a builder. In all the literature of the ancient world, nothing comes close to the honor paid to the “wife of noble character.” At a time when women were reckoned no more valuable than cattle in the barn, the poem in 31:10-31 showers the noble woman with gems of character and achievement. It’s best to sit and read it through several times for full effect. I cite this closing chapter of the book we’ve been studying, not because I intend to exclude men from the home-builder enterprise, but because the Bible so definitely includes woman. And because of one notable accolade:

**Her children arise and call her blessed... (31:28).**

She must have done something to merit such praise. Let’s face it: mothers know how easy it is to feel under-appreciated! And of course, they are under-appreciated.

Imagine what that’s like — to be called *blessed* by your children! If a woman — a mother — takes seriously her vocation, then she is a true builder of children. Consider: she conceived them, carried them for nine months, went through labor (in most cases), and brought them into the world. Then she nursed them, and managed the paraphernalia associated with their hygiene, comfort, sleep, and nurture. You’d better believe she “built them.” Some may find this overstatement. But a fitting way to conclude this week’s study is to consider the little story at the beginning of our conclusion, and then to reflect on the character qualities present in the noble woman described in Proverbs 31.

There are many elaborative words in this chapter, and they apply equally to the children-builder depicted in each verse. Fathers, pay attention! Remember that in *Proverbs* wisdom was consistently depicted as a woman (re-read Proverbs 8-9), and men are called upon to pay attention to Lady Wisdom and reject the allurements of Lady Folly. Perhaps because of the unique place God has given women in the order of procreation and birth, she becomes a fitting symbol of what all human beings should be like as builders of their children. That includes fathers. There’s no room for chauvinism in this regard. Humanity is defined in Genesis 1-2 in terms of male and female. Moreover, through children, human beings are commissioned to “fill the earth” with many instances of God’s image. Those chapters are also worth a re-read before you leave the themes of this study.

Voddie Baucham once wrote: “God has designed your family—not the youth group, not the children’s ministry, not the Christian [or Government] school, but your family—as the principal discipling agent in your children’s lives.” Parenting is a calling, not a hobby. God is our maker, and He has privileged us to make things in imitation of Himself, whether a poem or a child. Once more we need to hear the heart-beat of *Proverbs*:

“The wise woman builds her house, But the foolish pulls it down with her hands” (14:1).

“Through wisdom a house is built and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches” (Prov. 24:3-4).

Our homes are to be an oasis to our families, a center of operations to refuel and send, a refuge for our children, a delight to our own souls. Through faithful parenting, we fill the rooms with “precious and pleasant” things — more precious, I submit, than gold and silver or any precious stone.

Parents and their children share a story that is bigger than they are. To parents is given the wise responsibility of helping their children write the unique story of their lives. Scripture gives us the raw materials for making sense out of that project, and the ability to see it go forward successfully. When parents do the parenting thing, they are not only helping their kids write the little stories of their own lives, they are also drawing sharp connections between God’s story and their own. Yes, each child is unique and, like the facets of a diamond, they reflect the glory of God in a unique way. But it is the same glory which they reflect, and this is the high honor bestowed on parents: to build something for their kids which brings them into that glory; which brings each child into the birth of God’s New Creation. This is the house which wisdom builds, and its rooms are filled with things which last forever.

Glory to God! Amen.

**Digger Deeper:** *Get Smart: How to Build Something for Your Kids*  
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Get Smart: How to Build Something for Your Kids* .... Carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. What fundamental principle does Scripture give for building a solid home (Psalm 127:1)? How does the teaching of Jesus reinforce this principle (Matthew 7:24-27)?
2. What role does wisdom play in the home, and what opposition does wisdom face in performing this work (Proverbs 9)?
3. Using the following passages from *Proverbs*, make at least five major observations about wise conduct in building a godly home (12:7; 14:1, 11; 15:6, 25; 17:1, 13; 21:9; 25:24; 21:12, 20; 24:3-4, 15-16).
4. According to Proverbs 14:26-27, home is to be a “refuge.” Explain what the writer means, and then suggest some practical examples of how this can be true in your home.
5. In the same text, explain the phrase “fountain of life.” Refer to these additional texts from *Proverbs* to further expand the meaning: 10:11; 13:14; 16:22; 18:4. Also, compare Psalm 36:9; Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13.
6. Read Psalm 127:3 and discuss the meaning of these three words, as they apply to the place of children in the home: “heritage,” “fruit,” and “reward.”
7. Parents are to be an example to their children. How does *Proverbs* develop that theme (20:7; 31:28; 14:26)? What does the New Testament tell us about the importance of being an example (1 Peter 2:21; Philippians 3:17)?
8. Parents are to be the primary instructors of their children. Explore this idea using the following texts: Proverbs 1:8; 6:20; 19:27; 7:1; 5:12-13; 10:1; 15:20; 23:15-16, 25-26; 27:11; 29:3; 13:1.
9. Parents are to lovingly discipline their children. Discuss this statement, referring to these passages: Proverbs 22:6; 3:11-12; 13:24; 22:15; 19:18; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17. Define the word “discipline” in light of what you read, and also suggest what it is *not*. Compare the teaching of Deuteronomy 8:1-6 and Hebrews 12:5-11.
10. Examine more closely the familiar verse in 22:6. Suggest two or three possible meanings. What mis-readings of this passage have you heard?
11. Using the following readings from *Proverbs*, develop ten lessons parents should teach their children: (1) 1:7; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26-27; 15:16; 16:6; 19:23; (2) 4:23; 23:7; (3) 1:8; 4:1-4; 6:20-23; 30:17; (4) 1:11-18; 2:10-15; 13:20; (5) 2:16-19; 5:3-5; 6:23-33; 7:6-27; (6) 5:15-20; (7) 4:24; 10:11, 19-21, 32; 12:18, 22; 15:1-2; 16:23; 20:15; (8) 6:6-11; 10:4-5; 22:29; (9) 3:9-10; 11:24-26; 19:17; 22:9; (10) 3:27-29; 25:21-22.
12. According to Proverbs 31, what contribution does “the noble woman” make to the building of a godly home? Explain the significance of 31:28. Compare this chapter with the theme of 14:1 and 24:3-4.  
3:27-29; 25:21-22