

Fleeing Temptation and Evil
Proverbs 22:3; Proverbs 19:20
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The Jewish leaders at the time of Christ had the foresight to discern when the weather would be fair or foul by looking to the sky to note various changes, but the Lord Jesus said they were altogether lacking discernment as to the judgment that would befall them should they reject Him as their Savior. How often do we ignore various warning signs that come to us through the Scripture, through preaching, through godly advice and counsel, and carelessly walk into temptation and sin suffering great pain and heartache because we did not take seriously signs as conspicuous as flashing red lights with danger written all over them? Perhaps we did not heed those warning signs put before us because our curiosity was aroused (and so we proceeded forward to see what the danger was all about), or because we only wanted to flirt with a certain temptation for a little while (believing we could rescue ourselves later from a complete fall into that sin), or because we rebelliously pushed our way past those danger signs (believing we could avoid the tragic consequences that would follow). Regardless of the cause, whenever we do not pay careful attention to God's flashing lights and ringing bells at train tracks in our lives and rather ignore God's warning signs, we will sooner or later suffer serious ill effects when the consequences of those decisions level us like a speeding locomotive.

From our text this Lord's Day, we shall consider the following two main points: (1) The Prudent Man Wisely Flees from Evil (Proverbs 22:3a); and (2) The Simple Man Carelessly Falls into Evil (Proverbs 22:3b).

I. The Prudent Man Wisely Flees from Evil (Proverbs 22:3a).

A. The Hebrew word for "prudent" may be used in a negative sense as when one is crafty or shrewd and uses his mind to devise evil plans (as in Job 5:12). Or it may be used in a positive sense of one who is wise in applying knowledge to practical situations in life (as here in Proverbs 22:3).

1. Those who are prudent have insight into decisions that confront them. They consider not only the right motive for decisions to be made (which is love for God), not only the right standard to be used in making decisions (which is God's law), but also the right end that should be sought in making decisions (which is God's glory).

2. Those who are prudent consider not only the short term effects of their decisions, but the long term effects as well. They look into the future to see where the decisions they make will likely lead them. They are not existentialists living only in the present and making decisions only on the basis of how those decisions will likely affect them in the here and now. They are prudent because they foresee the good and the evil that is likely to come from decisions they are presently making, and accordingly they hide themselves from future evil by finding shelter in wise decisions presently made.

3. Those who are prudent will, therefore, not make hasty, rash decisions. They will take the following steps to make wise decisions and to avoid evil consequences down the line.

a. First, those who are prudent will consider ever so carefully the revealed will of God from Holy Scripture (Psalm 119:97-104). Remember that we have no warrant from God's Word to seek His will in daily decisions that will affect our future lives if we are not seeking to do what we now know to be God's revealed will for our lives (John 7:17).

b. Second, those who are prudent will listen carefully to the godly advice and counsel of church officers, parents, and mature friends in the faith (Proverbs 19:20; Proverbs 23:9). It is generally not a good idea to take a poll of as many people as possible, lest one become more confused than enlightened. Rather it is wiser to select a few counselors who have the experience and maturity of Christian knowledge and spiritual warfare in the trenches.

c. Third, those who are prudent will pray diligently that God's Spirit will grant them foresight in seeing where their decisions will likely lead them (James 1:5-7). We are not limited to our own short-sightedness, but may call upon the Lord to open our eyes to see whether we are sowing in righteousness or in corruption, and therefore whether we will reap a crop of righteousness or corruption in the future. So many presently sow seed in making foolish decisions concerning the future and then pray for a crop failure once they begin to reap what they have sown. Dear ones, let us learn now the important lesson that the sad consequences of our foolish decisions usually catch up with us. And when they do, it's not a pretty sight.

d. Fourth, those who are prudent will also consider who will likely benefit or be hurt by the decisions they are now making. For example, if you are faced with a temptation to sin (and the warning signals are loud and clear that there is evil in the path ahead of you), you are then faced with an important decision about the future (and not simply a decision about the present). Will you jeopardize your welfare and the welfare of others? Will you sacrifice your testimony for Jesus Christ? Will you see the evil but not flee from it? Will you flirt and play with the temptation like a small child playing with matches? If you do, sooner or later, you will be burnt just like that child. However, God graciously grants to the prudent man the ability to weigh out the future consequences of his present decisions and to flee from even the appearance of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22) for his own sake, for the sake of others, and for the glory of God.

B. Consider for a moment from the pages of Scripture a prudent man and a prudent woman who saw evil in their paths and fled from it.

1. Joseph had wickedly been sold into slavery by his brothers. His Egyptian master had placed him in charge of managing his whole household. However, his master's wife had evil designs for Joseph. Let us pick up the biblical account in Genesis 39:7-12. Here was a prudent young man. He saw the red flashing lights and rather than heading for them, he ran from them. But someone may ask, "Did not Joseph suffer terrible consequences for fleeing from evil in that this woman lied about him and he was cast unjustly into prison?" For a time his prudent decision did cost him, but God turned it out for his welfare and for the welfare of his family and all of Egypt in exalting him to second place in authority in Egypt and in preserving many from death. There was a decision to be made as the temptation was presented to Joseph. He saw the evil and fled. This he did not in his own strength (of course), for the flesh is powerless against such temptations (regardless of what the temptation may be). He fled in the strength of God's Spirit. He was able to flee in the moment because he had prepared himself to do so through faith in Christ and communion with His Savior. Joseph did not flirt with the temptation for a while. He did not indulge himself with the temptation, deceiving himself into believing he could free himself whenever he desired. He realized that any response other than fleeing the evil that was in his path was to give the temptation an occasion to work evil in his life.

a. Dear ones, God would have us know with certainty that we who are Christians are not the slaves of sin and temptation. Why? Because Christ has overcome these enemies in His death and resurrection for us. God nailed our old man to the cross of Christ. When Christ died, the power of sin was broken in the lives of those who trust in Christ alone for eternal salvation so that the promise of help, strength, power, and life now flows to us in saying "NO" to temptation (Romans 6:12-14).

b. Furthermore, there is an endless supply of grace for God to forgive us, to grant us a repentant heart, to cause us to hate evil and to love righteousness, to lead us into new obedience, and even to make something beautiful of our lives in His own time, even when we have made something ugly of our lives due to our foolishness in not heeding to the many warning signs He has graciously set up for us so that we might flee that temptation. There is hope in Christ. We cannot remain in the dust. Yes! God may discipline us as children very severely for the sinful and foolish decisions we make, but He does so because He loves us not because He hates us. He does so that we might learn by experience that when we touch a hot stove after being warned time and time again, we will feel the effects of our sin (not as righteous condemnation against us but as loving chastisement for our spiritual good).

2. Hannah is an example of a prudent woman who fled the evil before her (1 Samuel 1). The Lord had closed her womb in not giving her children, and her husband's second wife (Peninnah), who had children, did not cease to make Hannah's life miserable by her taunting and teasing. Hannah could have lashed out against her adversary, but she saw the evil in her path and she rather fled to the Lord in prayer and committed the whole matter to God. The Lord heard her cry and blessed her with children. Hannah was confronted with a decision. Would she vent her anger against this rival who took delight in tormenting her or would she flee the temptation by fleeing to the Lord? She saw the evil and ran from it rather than to it.

a. Dear ones, you are tempted many times throughout the week to vent your anger due to pressure that seems to squeeze the very life out of you, or due to the taunting of others who are just waiting for you to blow your fuse, or due to some sin of your own which you are justifying, or due to some extreme pressures in your marriage, in your job, in making ends meet financially, or due to the loss of someone very dear to you. What will you do? What will be the consequences of seeing and knowing the evil of anger, rage, violence, a harsh response, or a vengeful spirit in wanting to get even with others and then walking down that path anyway? You will be swallowed up and consumed by it until it devastates you and robs you of communion with Christ, a peace that passes all understanding, a contentment in every circumstance of life, the joy of the Lord, family and friends. As Christians we are set free from having to make such foolish and sinful decisions, but we are not free from the consequences that follow when we make such foolish and sinful decisions. God is not mocked—whatsoever a man soweth that will he also reap (Galatians 6:7-8).

b. Dear ones, to be forewarned is to be forearmed in meeting such temptations. To prepare yourself at the very outset of the day to meet these temptations by prayer, renewal of your covenant with Christ, hiding His Word in your heart that you might not sin against Him is to be ready to meet those temptations. Some people act as though the most courageous thing to do is to go toe to toe with your besetting sins, and so they place themselves in the most tempting situations possible to show that they can overcome these sins (like the drunkard who is going to do battle with his sin by frequenting the bar and when he begins to fall he cries out to the Lord, "Save me from this temptation!"). Dear ones, this is simply tempting God to save us after we have foolishly thrown ourselves into the path of the racing locomotive. Certainly, if temptation ambushes us, we must fight it to the death right on the spot, but when we see the temptation from a distance and can avoid it by fleeing, how much more prudent to do so. Let us therefore follow the examples of Joseph and Hannah in fleeing the evil temptations that daily confront us and rather fleeing to Christ to rescue us.

c. Let us not only hate and despise sin, but also the very temptation to sin. Let us learn to pray every day, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." For if we enjoy the temptations offered by sin and try to get as close to the edge of the canyon as possible without falling in, it is just a matter of time before we will fall to our pain and heartache for not heeding the many gracious warning signs God gave us along the way to stay away from the edge of that cliff.

II. The Simple Man Carelessly Falls into Evil (Proverbs 22:3b).

A. The Hebrew word for "simple" comes from a verb which means "to be open, spacious, wide." For the simple person is "wide open" to various kinds of enticements and seductions to sin. The simple man does not have the grace of discernment and prudence in properly evaluating what the consequences of his decisions are likely to be as it relates to the glory of God and the welfare of himself and others. Our text simply describes him as a person who sees the evil, but despite all the warnings, his lust, his curiosity, his passion, his selfishness drive him to walk that path anyway to his own hurt and even to his own destruction. Here is one whom the world describes as "broad-minded" because he is willing to entertain whatever is presented to him in doctrine or life. His own insecurity continually drives him to try this or to try that. He is gullible and open to

the suggestions and temptations of sin because he does not have a firm foundation in God's Word.

1. Are Christians narrow-minded? In the right sense, absolutely! We are not narrow-minded because we are uninformed about the world around us. However, we are narrow-minded (in a good sense) because we believe there is only one way to God—not many ways to God. We are narrow-minded (in a good sense) because we believe God's truth is absolute—not relative. We are narrow-minded (in a good sense) because we believe there is only One who can give us everlasting life—not many who can do so. Jesus Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father but by faith in Him alone. The Lord Jesus also has told us in Matthew 7:13-14 that broad is the way that leads to destruction, but narrow is the path that leads to everlasting life and few there be that find it. We need never apologize for the narrowness of our Christian faith. It is the broad-mindedness of the world (which according to God is really a simple-mindedness) that leads one to fall prey to every deceitful lie and cunning temptation.

2. I speak to everyone within the sound of my voice, but I especially call the young people and young adults to hear what I say. Save yourselves from a world (and possibly an eternity) of misery and heartache, by not being worldly-minded, open-minded, or broad-minded to whatever suggestions the world may bring your way (whether in music, fashions, drugs, sex, philosophy, science, or religious ideas). There are some of us present today who could tell you what severe consequences have followed from foolish decisions we have made. Listen to those who are older and more experienced in life than yourselves. Don't think that because we are older that we cannot understand what you are going through. Listen and learn. Receive instruction and live. Invite the counsel of those who have learned the hard way. Learn from our errors, sins, and mistakes.

B. I leave the example of one biblical individual whose example (in this instance) we should not follow. For he flirted and played with temptation and sin rather than fleeing from it.

1. Samson was a man supernaturally empowered by God to do amazing feats of strength. He was a judge of Israel. He killed a thousand Philistines with the mere jaw bone of a donkey. He carried off the gates of a city on his back and left them upon a mountain top. He killed a lion with his bare hands. He broke thick ropes that fettered him as if they were wet spaghetti. But despite his supernatural physical strength, he was very weak and simple when it came to the temptations of women. He was indeed a man of faith who trusted God (according to Hebrews 11:32 where he is listed among those who were great men and women of faith), but he fell into serious sin. You will remember how Delilah, a harlot, was bribed by the Philistines to find out the secret of Samson's strength. She pled with Samson. She flirted with Samson. She entertained Samson. She was relentless in soliciting Samson to tell her the source of his strength. Rather than fleeing temptation, Samson flirted and played with it until he finally gave in to it and was humiliated before God's enemies. Yes, the Lord graciously granted Samson repentance, but he died a sudden death with the Philistines as the building crushed them all. Samson flirted with temptation and suffered the consequences of his sin. Joseph fled temptation and was greatly rewarded.

2. In the past 24 years of pastoral ministry, I have counseled many who deeply regretted foolish decisions they had made in the past—many of these decision had very serious consequences in their lives—imprisonment, children born out of wedlock, the dreaded disease of AIDS, divorce, loss of family and friends, loss of credibility due to lying, loss of health etc. How they would love to have it to do over again so as to avoid the suffering, pain, and misery of those decisions. Although they could not relive their past all over again, I could yet give them a certain hope that Christ was able to take those foolish sinful decisions and use them for their good if they would sorrow and grieve over the offense of their sin against God and others (and not simply sorrow over the consequences of their sin), if they would look in faith to the mercy of God and the free forgiveness of God found in Jesus Christ, and if they would renew their covenant with God to walk faithfully in His commandments (by His grace). For if the Lord would forgive and use David after he repented of having committed adultery, having become an accomplice in murder, and having deceived others about his

sin for approximately 9 months, He will do the same for you. If the Lord would forgive and use Solomon after he repented of having taken hundreds of wives and concubines (which were in fact adulterous relationships because he should have only had one wife) and having followed these wives in serving other gods, He will do the same for you. If the Lord would forgive and use Peter after he repented of having denied even knowing the Lord three times, He will do the same for you. There is forgiveness and life in Christ even after much regret and shame. There will be mourning for sin against God and others in the life of a Christian, but Christ promises the comfort of His forgiveness. He promises to make all things beautiful in His time.

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