

Remaining in the Congregation of the Dead

Proverbs 21:16

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The man that wanders out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead. (Prov. 21:16)

This is the 12th and the last of the Prophecies Solomon puts forth in his Book. One of His intentions is to communicate that when justice is practiced, it is a joy for those who have walked in its ways and a terror to those who have perverted them (v. 15). Verses 16–18 describe the reality of the terror for the wicked: they have turned from the path that leads to life (v. 16), loved mere pleasure and luxury to their own impoverishment (v. 17), and are themselves a ransom—an image that likely reflects the merciless manner in which they treated others (v. 18; cf. vv. 10, 13). The essence here underscores what has come to be the knowledge of what we call “common sense”. It is not anything that requires “special” knowledge of insight. Solomon’s point is that all men should know and practice this or they will suffer the lack for it.

This fact is driven home by the use of the Hebrew word translated “wanders”. It speaks of wandering about unknowingly or with lack of purposeful choice. It speaks of “staggering” or unknowingly going in an erroneous direction. We can get the message if we get in our mind one who is badly confused and cannot discern just which “way” in which he ought to proceed. Thus, his ability to make that choice winds up with him “wandering” instead of proceeding in the purposeful and thoughtful way he should have gone.

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The implication of the verse is that there is some purposeful choice involved here. The choice is not for the particulars of the path taken. It is for the decision to NOT do what is needful to see to it that all is done to be sure that they will go rightly and how they must.

How many of us have failed in this manner? In so many regards, life requires a careful and deliberate examination in order to plan and see to it that we do NOT end up wandering around subject to wandering “out of the way of understanding”. The “way” here speaks of the path or the road that leads to what Solomon calls “understanding” which, in turn speaks, not of mental capacity or a grasp of things, but rather of success or understanding/ comprehension that prepares and enables one accomplish what he desires to/must or should do. Whatever is needful to move along that “path” deliberately and with the aim of accomplishing the goal that it leads to.

As is normal for Solomon in these sort of Proverbs, he lays out what the result of doing/failing to do what he has said in the first phrase. He first all but says that those

who fit in the category of which he is speaking are already IN the group he cites in the second phrase.

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It is interesting that he builds the verb “remain” in the 3rd person (he, she, it) singular! He wants his readers to picture the particular nature of what he is saying. It is not so much that he wants us to take the “group” idea (which would be present if he had used the 3 person plural – they) so much as he wants us think in terms of our own, personal application of the Proverb. If “I” wander out of the path that I KNOW I ought to walk, I will remain in the congregation of the DEAD! The implication is that I am ALREADY in the congregation of the dead that “path” spoken of is a path that will lead one OUT that congregation. However, the point Solomon is at least three-fold:

1. First, The normal, or natural state of men is one that needs a way to leave the state of the “dead” spiritually.
2. Second, there IS a way that can enable one to emerge from the dead state that is the unredeemed normal state.
3. Thirdly, It takes our searching and application to see to it that we are proceeding on that “way” and headed rightly to the accomplishment of the spiritual goals God has set for us.
4. Fourthly, the result of ones’ failure proceed on that “way” has terrible results – the one failing to move along the “way” “remains” in the “dead” state.

Summarizing our interpretation...the way of true piety is the only way of understanding. To wander willfully out of that (and not return) is suicidal to the soul. The man who does so will (as is ironically said) “find a resting-place” indeed (as a guest at a banquet, as a sheep in the fold), but—among the multitude who did evil. As apostates from the faith, their position shall be with the giant sinners of old, in the abode of darkness and misery.

- They shall be fellow-guests with those who are in the depths of hell (Prov. 9:18).

¹⁸ *But he does not know that the dead are there,
That her guests are in the depths of hell.*

Death shall be their shepherd and feed them (Ps. 49:14).

¹⁸ *Though while he lives he blesses himself
(For men will praise you when you do well for yourself),
(Psalm 49:18)*

There are a couple place in the Scripture we can look by way of illustration for us:

- We’re told that the apostate angels are congregated in everlasting chains under darkness.

- Along with them will be found (we must fear) such renegades as Saul, Ahithophel, Jehoram, Judas.
- With them will rest (but not in peace) those unhappy excommunicate who, after having known the way of righteousness, have (deliberately) turned from the holy commandment delivered unto them (2 Pet. 2:21).

²¹ For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them.

And thinking by way of application... Who would not rather desire to come “*to the general Assembly and Church of the First-born, which are written in heaven*” (Heb. 12:22)? But if this be my aim as a Christian (and surely it is), let me avoid the first step “*out of the way.*” Apostasy begins in the heart. There is an indulged craving after the forbidden path or ever it is entered upon. There are inward misgivings and external calls which might for a while reclaim. But if, spite of all, persisted in, that path becomes as increasingly dear to the sinner and natural to him as the better pathway to the true Christian. And while the one is as surely pressing forward to the “*rest that remaineth for the people of God,*” and the “*banqueting house*” of Jesus, the other as surely (however unwittingly) is gradually approaching that abyss which shall terminate his wanderings forever in “*his own place*” (Acts 1:25). How distressing the thought that many who once started on the right road, and bade fair for the heavenly home, have wandered out of the way of understanding, and are (as Bunyan saw them) stumbling among the tombs! They had no thought of this when first they went astray, with a light heart and confident mien, purposing to return erewhile. But now their abode seems to be among the congregation of the dead, and may be fixed there. Let me, then, never follow the multitude to do evil, but choose and keep the narrow road with the few. For if holy Paul had need of watchfulness and self-discipline that he might not, after all, prove “*a castaway,*” is not the same need mine?