

Leadership And Covenants (Part Eight)

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At its heart, Proverbs 14:12—"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death"—instructs mankind in a vital truth: No truth is clearer, more direct, and more rewarding than God's truth. Nobody else's truth can exceed the reliability of God's truth, and in fact, it is impossible for Him to lie (Hebrews 6:18). *The Amplified Bible* provides this expansion: "There is a way which seems right to a man and appears straight before him, but at the end of it is the way of death." Yet, no deception is present when God and His Word are involved.

The word "death" at the proverb's conclusion is a clue that its instruction deals primarily with a choice of whether to sin in any circumstance. Within Proverbs, this verse is only one among many dealing with the human proclivity to make bad choices motivated by devious carnal desires to get the most and best for the self.

In the first chapter of his book, Solomon admonishes us that we will be confronted with difficult choices on whether to sin:

My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait to shed blood; let us lurk secretly for the innocent without cause; let us swallow them alive like Sheol, and whole, like those who go down to the Pit. We shall find all kinds of precious possessions, we shall fill our houses with spoil; cast in your lot among us, let us all have one purse." My son, do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path; for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood. (Proverbs 1:10-16)

Not every opportunity to choose to sin will be as obviously presented as this one. Yet, we all fall victim to the truth expressed in Proverbs 14:12. Adam and Eve, after being warned directly and personally by God, nonetheless almost immediately did what God had said *not* to do. The urge to satisfy our desires despite warnings exists for us just as it did for Adam and Eve. That we, too, sin after He reveals Himself to us is significant evidence that we truly do not respect and believe God as we should.

A great deal more evidence exists within Proverbs of how deeply pride is engrained in our character, persuading us to forge our way ahead rather than follow the wise counsel of men, let alone that of God. We may not fall into immediate death, but we do fall in achieving the success we had hoped for through carnal impatience, avoiding hard work, or even sheer hardheadedness because we refuse to follow sound counsel.

Before moving on, we will expand the instruction in Proverbs 14:12 more explicitly. The verse depicts a person following a path on a journey, which applies directly to all of us because, since our calling, we are on the way of salvation (Acts 16:17; 18:25-26). The Hebrew term underlying "right" more specifically means "straight" or "level," but it also contains moral implications. The same Hebrew word is translated in verse 11 as "upright," clearly showing its moral connotations.

Notice the strength of the scorn the proverb projects onto the traveler: The first phrase of the verse is singular (“a way”), but in the second phrase, it is plural (“ways”). Since no wise, human counsel appears in the context, it is safe to assume that in this case the counsel comes from God. Regardless, the fool will not listen to His advice.

Thus, as he begins to walk, he perceives a way open before him. This path shows promise of delivering happiness, power, and a long life, despite his being warned that things can easily go wrong in many ways with his preferred choice. Even so, he is blinded by his pride from the lesson God is teaching, which is clear: In God’s way of life, there are no shortcuts to success. His instruction must be followed if one seeks to avoid the pitfalls that will arise.

Proverbs 12:15 follows the same basic path of teaching as Proverbs 14:12, reading, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise.” The *Revised English Bible* [REB] translates this more strongly in alignment with Proverbs 14:12: “A fool’s conduct is right in his own eyes; to listen to advice shows wisdom.” The REB moves the focus from a person merely thinking, which may lead to rejecting counsel, to literal conduct, showing that he clearly rejected the good counsel God made available. Some are so proud that they tend to think of themselves as rarely wrong. In relation to God, the humanist thinks of himself so, always thinking he knows best. Yet, those who really do know God recognize that the humanist is unaware of the weakness of his relationship with God, and thus they know he is foolish.

A third example involves a more specific application but reaches the same conclusion as the others: “The way of the lazy man is like a hedge of thorns, but the way of the upright is a highway” (Proverbs 15:19). Everybody would love to hit on a “get-rich-quick scheme” to avoid the rigors and slowness of a tried-and-true way. Those in “get-rich-quick mode” love to find ways to cut corners, quickly getting the job completed and the payment in hand.

The proverb colorfully likens such a person’s way to a hedge of thorns. A hedge of thorns, while not life-threatening, is at least irritatingly painful from the hundreds of small wounds that could have been avoided by laboring with wisdom rather than trying to make a quick buck at another’s expense. The ignored wisdom leads to the sluggard being constantly hindered by obstacles he has himself created. The *Revised Standard Version*’s translation supplies a clear contrast: “The way of the sluggard is overgrown with thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.”

An element in the proverb that we may easily overlook is that laziness is contrasted with uprightness, a reminder that an element of immorality tinges the sluggard’s sloth. The immorality often manifests in a form of dishonesty, as the sluggard attempts to hide the reality of his indolence in “reasons” as to why he accomplished so little or failed to carry his portion of the load. Again, the instruction aligns with Proverbs 14:12 in that the lazy person’s attempts to avoid work produces penalties. The straight course, the tried-and-true one, is ultimately the easiest to walk and produces the most. That is God’s way.

A fourth proverb, this one in Proverbs 13:14, declares, “The law of the wise is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death.” This one succinctly expresses the teaching, not just of Proverbs 14:12, but of the entire book of Proverbs. The figure of a fountain is especially apt when we consider the dryness of Judah’s weather. A fountain or spring may be the difference between life and death, even as wisdom can be at times.

The Hebrew word *torah* underlies “law” in this verse. “Teaching” or “instruction” more literally expresses its meaning rather than “law.” The foolish ignore wisdom for the sake of their carnal desires and plunge toward painful problems—perhaps even death—that they could have avoided if they had only submitted to the truth contained in either God’s or man’s wisdom. *The Living Bible* renders this verse with pointed counsel: “The advice of a wise man refreshes like water from a mountain spring. Those accepting it become aware of the pitfalls on ahead.”

Catastrophic Costs

These proverbs provide a concise and unambiguous overview of why this world is the way it is. It has not become this way because God hid the reality of His existence and instruction from mankind (see Romans 1:20), but because mankind has chosen to ignore God’s reality and the wisdom He has made available to humanity from the beginning. Adam and Eve, representing all mankind, are the case in point. As they did, so we all have done in our days. Ecclesiastes 7:29 tersely summarizes how human life began and what has gone awry since: “Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

Virtually everyone who has ever lived eventually asks, “Why is life such a struggle?” Why does life so frequently seem hopelessly mired in what is base and frustratingly difficult? The answer appears in Genesis 2-3. No other section of the Bible so clearly depicts the stark contrast between the idyllic beauty, innocence, and potential for happiness in life in Eden and the shocking judgments God hands down just a few chapters later. The lesson is clear, but mankind still ignores the reality that, as God warned, sin destroys. Despite the advantages it promises, sin entices human foolishness.

From the first chapters of Genesis, we can learn it does not matter whether any other human sees the sin nor what we think about the sin. What matters is what the Creator says. Nothing can change that because what He says is reality—truth. The early portions of Genesis teach us that, when God turned mankind loose following their sins in the Garden, people used their liberty to commit sin even more freely. Almost no one took to heart the lessons contained within the first sins. Humanity continued doing what *seems* right rather than what *is* right.

In Genesis 4, God records the first murder. In this case, it was not one of just any man but of a humble, righteous, believing man—by his flesh-and-blood brother! In addition, God banishes the murderer from continuing any kind of relationship with Him. Fear rises in Cain’s murderous heart, making life even more burdensome for him following his choice that seemed right to him.

God then gives us a brief glimpse into the life of Cain’s grandson, Lamech, who, not only has multiple wives, but also boasts of having killed a man. He then warns—following the worst example of his day, his own grandfather—that should any future harm befall him, he will be even more menacing. We see humanity’s problems compounding as the number of ways that seemed right increases. Through these examples, we see that mankind’s arrogance, combined with his poor choices contrary to God’s instruction, grew rapidly.

A Slave to Decay and Death

We must not forget that nature, too, is affected by man’s self-centered choices. When our first parents sinned, the divine judgment included effects on nature. The apostle Paul presents an overview of this in Romans 8:19-22, in which he personifies creation:

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope, because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

Some of the descriptors Paul uses portray the creation as seeking freedom from the effects of sin, as if it were straining forward in impatient anticipation to see the revelation of the sons of God. The term *futility* (verse 20) more vividly indicates “uselessness” or “emptiness” as the effect of the curse on creation. Overall, Paul exemplifies nature as a slave to decay and death because of sin—transgressions it did not commit but men did, who imposed on it the pains against which it was helpless to defend itself.

If a thinking and believing person ever needs a reminder that everything in life matters, the results of Adam’s and Eve’s sins should do the trick. Neither of them ever considered the long-range and long-lasting effects of what they were about to do. God is showing us broadly that there is no such thing as committing a sin in a corner, one that affects nobody else, because everyone and everything are part of the operation God has created. As its sovereign Governor, He actively rules what He has made. Planet Earth almost seems alive at times because everything is so interconnected.

We must avoid thinking of God’s creation as being a mere machine. In addition to its amazing resilience and recuperative powers, creation also contains living, thinking, decision-making beings, either helping to maintain it properly or destroying it. Though people of no consequence in seemingly insignificant circumstances commit sins, their sins always create effects beyond the time, the place, and the people against whom they are committed. It is no wonder that Scripture likens sin to leaven. A major lesson here is that none of us lives in a vacuum. If nothing else, earth’s Creator is always overseeing it and judging. Though extremely merciful, He is also just.

The lesson of Proverbs 14:12 is this: Only too late do deluded persons who ignore the reality of God and His Word discover that they are on the crowded highway to death. What God presents in His Word is not that sinners were tricked, but that they relied too heavily on their own wisdom rather than turning in humility to the God who offers to mankind a way of clear choices—His way.

Sin Builds, Sanctification Revealed

Approximately 1,650 years passed between the creation of Adam and Eve and the Flood. That is longer than the time Israel existed as a nation from Moses to the days of Jesus Christ, the destruction of the Temple, and the scattering of the Jews over the world. It is longer than the time between Christ and Columbus landing in the West Indies. It is also longer than the time it took the scattered Israelites and Jews, most having forgotten who they were, to settle and form nations in Europe.

More than a millennium and a half is ample time for humanity to compile an unambiguous record of its relentless sinfulness. God made sure He preserved in His Word a reliable source of truth about that long period of increasing human evil. It is information we have considerable use for.

The people living before the Flood lived very long lives. They were every bit as intelligent as we are, and a great deal was happening in their world. Though God records few details, He lets us know that what was taking place was not good. One of the few things God preserved for our learning (Romans 15:4) is of prime importance to us: He gives an overview of how pre-Flood people behaved, how

they conducted their lives. It clarifies what triggered the Flood and more besides. Mankind *earned* the Flood through its vile conduct:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, “I will destroy man who I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” . . . The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. (Genesis 6:5-7, 11-12)

At this forbidding juncture, God reveals a spiritual doctrine that is supremely vital to our daily lives and ultimately to our salvation. If we do not grasp this doctrine and set its seriousness firmly in mind, it will throw off our understanding of who God’s elect are, and we will greatly undervalue the degree of accountability and appreciation we owe to God for His mercy.

It is appropriate to dig into this doctrine at any time, but it is especially appropriate now because of the nature of the period we are living through. The Bible itself, combined with the daily news reports, indicates the time of Jesus’ return is drawing near. Many believe that we are in the beginning stages of what has been called “the crisis at the close.” Consider how similar those pre-Flood times are to our own. As God tells the story in His Word, we are only into the sixth chapter of the first book, and the end of mankind, except for the few who would be spared, was near at hand!

This similarity brings up a critical question for all of us to consider soberly: Who was saved from the devastation of the Flood? Every person did not die in the Flood. We need to think this through because the Flood most definitely came, just as the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord, as prophesied by the same unchanging God for our time, will also surely come.

Within God’s record of man’s building sinfulness, Genesis 6:8, 13, 18 states:

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. . . . And God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth. . . . But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.”

The answer to the critical question is that *only those God specifically spared were saved*. He specifically names them. God’s “grace” is the overall general reason, but the specific aspect of His grace that preserved their lives is that they were *sanctified*—set apart—for salvation from the Flood.

In both the Hebrew and Greek languages, the root words underlying “salvation” mean the same thing. Both terms mean “given deliverance,” implying prosperity despite impending disaster. In this specific instance, the impending disaster is the prophesied Flood. God’s first step in delivering some was to sanctify those He chose, Noah and his family.

Sanctified for Creation and Salvation

Sanctification is of major importance to those of us called into God’s church, as I Thessalonians 4:3-5 points out: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual

immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like Gentiles who do not know God.” *Sanctification* (Greek *hagiasmos*) is the noun form of the verb *sanctify*, which means “to set apart for God’s use, to make distinct from what is common.” Thus, those called into the church are set apart by God, as were Noah and his family, for His glory, for salvation from prophesied disasters, and for becoming like Him.

II Peter 2:5 carries the Flood record further: “[For God] did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing the flood on the world of the ungodly.” Noah and his family faithfully responded, doing what God sanctified them to do. Noah not only built the ark, which became the physical means of their salvation, but its construction gave them the time and opportunity to explain to the world why it needed to be built. Noah preached to mankind of God, of their sins, and of the prophesied certainty of the Flood if the people chose not to repent.

From this example, we must grasp God’s intention in His sanctification of us. Noah and his family did not save themselves. This example not only fits into this series on the covenants, but it is also helpful preparation for Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, and the ongoing new creation in our lives (II Corinthians 5:17). Like Noah and his family, we are required to respond faithfully to what God has ordained us to do. We must understand that we are God’s workmanship (Ephesians 2:10), and the responsibilities He assigns are part of His creation of us in His image.

Here is a key question as we continue: Did the salvation God offered Noah also apply to anyone who randomly chose to join him and his family in fulfilling what God specifically required them to do? Absolutely not! *Only the eight whom God sanctified were saved from the Flood.* We need to take another look at a familiar scripture and update this truth about our calling into the church.

Our Savior declares in John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” We are all aware of this truth to some degree, but do we understand and appreciate the matchlessness of what we have received as thoroughly as we need to for success in our calling?

Did Jesus really mean “no one”? Was He generalizing, or did He literally mean it? Is there always “open season” in terms of salvation, that is, is it accessible to anyone who wants it?

As a point of contention, this doctrine has faded somewhat, but 400 years ago, as the Protestant Reformation ignited, it was a major issue. It is still Catholic Church teaching that from the moment of birth everybody has good within them. It just needs to be developed. So, at any time in a person’s life, all he needs to do is to hear the gospel, agree with what he heard, accept it because it connects with the good already in him—and he is on his way to salvation, adding to his goodness and holiness by righteous living. The Protestant reformers did not agree, as they believed, in this case, what the Bible says.

This doctrine marks a major division of beliefs between those called “evangelicals” and other Christians. What the Bible teaches on it is mind-bending and humbling. We can see the biblical truths regarding this doctrine unfold by examining what our Savior said Himself, as well as what His apostles added.

Humanity’s Resident Evil

Jesus says in Matthew 9:12-13: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (see Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31-32). Everyone—and that term is all-inclusive—whom the Father draws to Christ for spiritual salvation is not good but spiritually sick, a sinner. Additionally, the word “repentance” implies that those brought to Christ for forgiveness and salvation do not possess goodness but are evil, since only those spiritually enabled to see the need to repent would come to Him for spiritual healing. “Good” people would not.

In Romans 3:10-18, Paul adds emphasis to the exposé of mankind’s character:

There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

This passage is a major indictment of mankind. Notice the terms he uses—“none” and “all,” that is, none is good, all are evil. David, the author of Psalm 14 from which Paul drew Romans 3:10-18, believed this truth a thousand years before the apostle, and in Psalm 14, David attributes this declaration to God Himself. Do we dare accuse God of lying about those He created?

Matthew 19:17 is exceptionally clear: “So [Jesus] said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Jesus is plainly stating that, since God is the only One who is good, no one among all humanity can truly claim to possess goodness. No one’s goodness rises anywhere near the level of God’s goodness. Jesus, however, then explained to the rich young ruler what he needed to do. As God in the flesh, He knew what the young man needed to do to get on the road to godly goodness, so He taught Him.

Matthew 7:9-11 contains a startling portrayal of mankind’s resident evil:

Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?
Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?

Mankind is evil! In this case, Jesus did not use *evil* to indicate “essential wicked character,” but more along the lines of “given to do acts of wicked conduct,” indicating an inclination. Though unconverted and not specifically sanctified to be created in God’s image, a worldly person can on occasion do a good thing. Some uncalled people do them consistently. However, doing some good things now and then does not make an individual good by nature. Thus, doing good does not signify that a person is a called, sanctified, and converted child of God.

Jesus explains the root of mankind’s problem in Matthew 15:16-20:

Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out

of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.

The heart of man is inclined to evil by nature, which is why humanity has behaved as it has throughout history. Jesus clearly exposes the basic evil nature of the heart of man, so the good it does is sufficient neither for carrying out the responsibilities God has laid on those He has sanctified nor for salvation itself. The human heart needs to be changed through a new creation, the spiritual workmanship of the holy God. This new creation is not merely a repair job like fixing a flat tire. The generator of goodness must be good within itself; goodness must be its essential nature.

A Totally New Heart

King David makes a pertinent assertion about mankind's heart in Psalm 51:7-10, confirming what Jesus says in Matthew 15. He understood a major element of mankind's problem:

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

David grasped the major difference between the hearts of God and humans. He uses the same Hebrew term for "create" as Moses uses in Genesis 1:1, when God created the heavens and the earth. Man's heart does not have the foundational goodness of our holy God's heart.

His primary request in the psalm concerns his sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the arranged murder of Uriah. He first craved forgiveness and cleansing of those sins, but he also undoubtedly wanted his heart to be created anew so that he would never repeat such sinful conduct. He desired the nature of his heart in pristine condition so he could truly glorify God. David is asking God to fulfill in him what Paul speaks of in II Corinthians 5:16-17:

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

This renewal of the heart is not simply godly righteousness legally added to a carnal human heart. The new heart is not merely a repair of the old one. David speaks of an entirely new, clean heart and of a mind generated and motivated by God's Holy Spirit. It is a completely new creation of God, paralleling what Adam underwent as God created him in Genesis 1. Was not Adam a new creation at that time?

Jesus explains when and how this new creation begins in John 3:1-7:

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"

Jesus describes the beginning of the process that ultimately leads to salvation and the Kingdom of God. We could also say that this is what triggers a person's calling into the church. He reveals to Nicodemus that the spiritual Creator God must deliberately begin the process. It is not an event that will randomly happen when an individual shows an interest in matters of the Kingdom of God. The new creation will take some time, as the person must be taught of God, experience life in a relationship with Him, and voluntarily cooperate with Him within the relationship.

Spiritually, the Father is totally involved right from the get-go. As the ultimate Creator and Sovereign Ruler, in His salvation process, nothing happens randomly to those He calls. One of the central issues in this spiritual creation is God's sovereignty over His purposes on the one hand, and on the other, as shown by history, mankind's lack of submissive conversion. God, through His creative wisdom and powers within the relationship, must bridge this huge gap. If He is not involved in the birth process from the very beginning, framing us in His image, how can He truly be called our Father?