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### **Proverbs 2:1–10, ESV**

*2 My son, if you receive my words  
and treasure up my commandments with you,  
2 making your ear attentive to wisdom  
and inclining your heart to understanding;  
3 yes, if you call out for insight  
and raise your voice for understanding,  
4 if you seek it like silver  
and search for it as for hidden treasures,  
5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD  
and find the knowledge of God.  
6 For the LORD gives wisdom;  
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;  
7 he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;  
he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,  
8 guarding the paths of justice  
and watching over the way of his saints.  
9 Then you will understand righteousness and justice  
and equity, every good path;  
10 for wisdom will come into your heart,  
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;*

### **Proverbs 16:9, NLT**

*9 We can make our plans,  
but the LORD determines our steps.*

## **Voyage au centre de la Terre.**

I've told you before about my best friend in grammar school. He was very gifted, but his mother was raising him and his brother alone, and they had very little money. His mother worked some sort of manual job; I don't remember exactly what she did. They lived in an apartment across the street from me. In the past, I told you that he shoplifted a number of items and stored them in his room. His mother made him return them all. I'd like to tell you another story about my friend. I don't know what I called him before. Let's call him Johnny. Johnny and I regularly rode our bikes to school and we often did our homework together. Johnny's mother worked very hard to make sure that he and his older brother took their schoolwork seriously and stayed out of trouble. His older brother, by the way, who was perhaps six years older than us, ended up with a Ph.D. in Greek and Latin literature. Johnny's mother figured that a good thing for her to do was to buy him books and to encourage him to hang out with me, since I was a good kid and got straight A's in school. So, what she would do was about once a month buy two books for Johnny. She would give them to him when I was there. She would hand one book to me and one to Johnny. They were his books, but we would each read one, and then trade. One day, she brought home *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, both by Jules Verne.

She gave me *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. We sat down in his room and read nonstop for about three hours. Then, I took the book home. I showed it to my mother. Her name was Annette Claire DuBois and her first language was French. When she looked at the book, she frowned. I said hey, it's a good book. She said, but this is a translation. It's really a French book. So, we got in her car, a 1960 Chevy with absolutely huge horizontal fins on it, and we drove to the French bookstore in town. There, she found the original: *Voyage au centre de la Terre*. She said that I should read the original, the French version. I have to say that it wasn't easy. It radically slowed down my reading speed, but I did as she ordered. There was no way that she was going to let her half French son read a French classic in English! The next day, when I went over to Johnny's house, I had both versions with me. I put the English one on his shelf and continued to read the French version. At one point, his mother came in the room. She was well aware that the author was French, and she was impressed that my mother had gotten the original version for me to read. She said I should teach Johnny how to read it. Johnny was not so sure that was a good idea, and I never did this. But I'll get back to this story.

Our first passage today is from Proverbs. We've talked about this book several times. The Proverbs were written by a special class of Israelites called

Sages. They are pithy, cleverly written sayings that tell people how to live wise and blessed lives. A common theme is that a godly life, one that honors the one true God is typically also a wise life. In other words, it's often obvious what we should do to live according to God's laws – just live in a way that feels natural.

Our proverb today has to do with the benefits of wisdom. In a way, this, the second chapter of the book, is a perfectly representative proverb. The proverb has two major points: first, the benefits of true wisdom are available only to those who work hard and take the process of learning seriously. The second is that the search for wisdom, or knowledge, will lead to the discovery of God. Through wisdom, in other words, we connect with our maker. Once we develop faith through wisdom, we will know how to live in a moral fashion. One of the reasons I like the second chapter of Proverbs so much is that it underscores just how wrong many people are about Christianity, about formal religion. It is not a mindless thing, where we learn to obey rules blindly and stop using our minds. It's just the opposite. A true Christian is a thoughtful person who realizes that ignorance leads to conflict and to foolish decisions, and that this, in turn, often leads to a life that is immoral, destructive, and extremely unfulfilling.

So, let's get back to the story of two boys reading books, with one of the boys forcibly and painstakingly reading one of them in its original French. A few

days after we were given the two books, Johnny and I did our homework together in his room. Then we went back to the two books. As we were sitting on the shag carpet in his room, we heard sirens. Then we heard cars screeching to a stop out front. Johnny's apartment was on the second floor. The apartment complex was very Californian in style; it consisted of a cluster of two-story buildings, each with about eight units in it, and with the staircases outside the buildings. Next, we heard footsteps pounding up the cement and steel stairs. Johnny's mother came into his room and told us to just keep reading and to stay inside the apartment – and to not go near the window. We obeyed. The next thing we heard were police officers banging on the door to the unit next door. Then we heard the door open, and then footsteps and voices coming from within that apartment. After several minutes, things fell silent. Then we heard footsteps on the stairs again, as people descended. As we learned the next day, we had somewhat distractedly read during a police raid. The people next door were doing something illegal, or they were wanted for something, and for the next week, police were in and out of the now-vacant apartment. At one point, an officer knocked on Johnny's door; his mother answered, and the officer asked her if she knew the people next door. She said no, that they seemed like "unsavory" people, and that she didn't even want to know why the police had come. She made it clear that she and her two

sons had worked very hard to not know these people – and that they wanted to keep it that way.

*For the LORD gives wisdom;  
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;  
7 he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;  
he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,  
8 guarding the paths of justice  
and watching over the way of his saints.  
9 Then you will understand righteousness and justice  
and equity, every good path;  
10 for wisdom will come into your heart,  
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.*

We have to remember that knowledge is a very good thing, but it must be something that God wants us to welcome into our hearts and that will be pleasant to our souls. The kind of wisdom that God gives, the kind that comes from God's mouth and that will help us understand what it means to be righteous in the eyes of God, and to seek justice and equity for all, well, that isn't the kind of knowledge that you'll find in the apartment next door to my childhood friend. I'm going to have a bit more to say about the books Johnny's mother bought for us. But first, let's look at our second quote. It's very short and very straightforward: <sup>9</sup> *We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps.* What this says is that we can plan all we want. We can get a good education, invest our money wisely, work hard for promotion within a company, demand our rights as free people in a

capitalistic nation, or collect as much stuff in our lives as we can possibly imagine – but in the end, it is God who controls our destiny – period. This is one of my favorite lines in the Bible. It's because I'm a very driven person. I tend to have lots of goals, to want to accomplish things. It's very important, though, for me to remember that I can plan and work as hard as I want, but I need to listen to God. It is God who actually knows what is best for me. While I am going about carrying out the things I want to do, I might cause myself to stray from the path that God has laid down for me. God has steps planned. I need to take them. If those steps don't coincide with the ones that lead to the things I want, then I need to abandon whatever earthly goal I'm chasing down.

So, back to the books that Johnny's mother had us reading. You might remember that I struggled to read the original French version, thanks to my mother, who didn't believe that a French classic should be perverted by being translated into English. You may or may not know that this book is about a group of adventurers who find an ancient manuscript, that when decoded takes them to a hidden passage in Reykjavik, Iceland. Our trio of adventurers descend a volcano and end up deep underground where they find a giant sea, giant mushrooms, and a herd of mastodons or dinosaurs, I'm not sure, and I believe a giant man who owns the mastodons or dinosaurs. But they come into great danger when they

set off an explosion to clear the path they want to take. As I recall, they realize that there is a lot of volcanic activity going on around them, that they have ignited a series of vast natural explosions that are far too powerful. They are going to be killed. But miraculously, they get blown upward through another volcano and find themselves back above ground, but now on an Italian island on the other side of the world. Don't complain if I have some of the details wrong. Remember, I read this as a boy, and I read it in a language I could barely understand.

What's the point? Well, after Johnny and I finished our two Jules Verne books, his mother asked us to tell her what they were about. Maybe she was making sure we had actually read them and weren't just goofing around in his room all those hours after school. I summarized the story for her. She saw a powerful theme in this book; this is what Johnny's mother told me: The leader of this expedition, I think it was a German scientist, convinces his nervous companions to defy nature and undertake a very dangerous mission. They plan it carefully and proceed step by step to explore and conquer the underworld of the Earth. They challenge nature by going where they don't belong and they dare to set off an explosion so they can go exactly where they want, not knowing the consequences. As it turns out, though, as Johnny's mother explained to me, while they were going about their earthly plans, God's plan was actually unfolding, and

it happened to include rescuing them by blowing them out of the center of the Earth and back to civilization. God, acting through the incredible powers of nature, proved to be far more powerful than our silly human adventurers.

Johnny's mother was right. Ultimately, as it turns out, we are in God's hands. We need to seek knowledge, seek the right kind of knowledge, and we need to use that knowledge, but we have to keep in mind that it's easy as intelligent humans to think we are in control. We need to use what we learn in this life, to use our education and our skills, to serve God by serving God's people – and we need to do our best to follow the steps laid down by God. When we try to do otherwise, we'll either end up being carted away out of our apartments by the cops, or if God has mercy on us, we'll get slammed upward through a volcanic eruption and tossed onto an island somewhere. Please pray with me.

*God, thank you for the world you gave us as a temporary home. Thank you for giving us powerful minds with which we can learn and explore. But please don't let us think that we are almighty. Let us feel the fire of the Holy Spirit within us so that we never become so arrogant as to believe that our path will lead to the right place. Please keep us in the footsteps you have laid out for us. And when we do forget, when we ignore your will, have mercy on us and blow us back to the surface of the Earth. Amen.*

