

PROVERBS 14:27

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

I have read and re-read, and hope to read again, a book called Season of Life. It is the story of a high school football team in Maryland, and two men who have sought to shape the young men on this team, into true men.

One of these men, named Joe, has led workshops with men. He says he asks the men to write out a definition of what it means to be a man. "Most men," he says, "are absolutely dumbfounded by the question."

Joe says after they think about it, most adult men describe manhood in terms of having a good job. Most younger men describe manhood in terms of having strength, or exerting power.

Joe often speaks of the false masculinity of our culture. He says we define manhood with three qualities: athletic ability, sexual conquest, and economic success.

On Mother's Day, we pondered what it means to be a woman. Today, on Father's Day, I ask, what is a man? What makes a man, a real man?

We get the start of an answer as we read Proverbs 14:27: "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death."

These words are for women, too, but they especially meet us as men, precisely where we are, in a world of confusion about manhood.

Like most Proverbs, this Proverb has two lines. The first ends with the word "life", and the second ends with the word "death." This Proverb is not just about doing better. This is a matter of life and death for men.

Let's start with death. The Proverb writer, Solomon, writes of THE SNARES OF DEATH.

A snare is a trap. We say, "Stay away from snares." But it's not that easy, because snares look good. In the words of one writer on these verses, Satan attacks by attraction. For men, right attractions become wrong-filled abuses, and men become ensnared. We give up life, and run toward death.

So what are these snares? I offer three - common to both the culture of Solomon and our culture. Surely you can think of more. But these snares are especially great for men - then and now.

The first snare is SEX.

Our sexuality is a gift from God. In the right place, at the right time, and in the right ways, it is good for men to enjoy their sexuality. But men easily turn rightful use into sinful abuse.

We read in Proverbs 7:4-5, "Say to wisdom, 'You are my sister, and call understanding your kinsman; they will keep you from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words.'" Then Solomon tells the sad tale of the foolish young man, who followed a path of death, by giving in to his sexual desires, with a married woman.

You do not need me to tell you this: we live in a seductive society.

You may need me to tell you this: as men, we are all too often, all too willing, to be seduced.

There is the seduction of fantasy - a thought life fed through the eye candy of our culture. Look at this. Look at that. Look at her. Look long. Think much. Let your imagination go.

There is the seduction of conquest - a sexual life fed through our false notions of masculinity - the idea that somehow you are a real man, based on how many women you have had.

It is a snare of death. It robs you of true life. It will kill your soul, and it may kill your body, as you pursue a false god, who will never satisfy.

Do you see this as a snare? I ask this of both men and women.

Men, do you see the snare here? Or have you just given up and given in? You may

think, "It's just the way I am. I can't change it." If you think like that, you have given up, and given in, and you are on the road to death.

Women, do you see the snare here? As a woman, it may be tough for you to understand this snare, because you are snared differently. Women, I urge you to know that Satan attacks by attraction, even a man you love and trust.

I do not call you to respond to that snare with paranoia. I call you to respond to that snare with prayer, for the men in your life.

One snare: sex. Another snare: WORK.

When Joe asked men about manhood, they responded by talking about work. With men and work in our culture, there are two extremes:

One extreme is too much work. Proverbs 11:4 says, "Wealth is worthless on the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death."

Some men think, "Maybe wealth will be worthless then, but it is worth a lot now, and I will do everything I can, to get it."

Or maybe it's not wealth. Maybe it's accomplishment. Maybe it's the desire to achieve, that drives a man to work too much.

It is right to want to produce and provide. We are made to work, and we are made to care for ourselves and our loved ones, through our work.

But how this can ensare men! We define ourselves by our work. If we are not working, we are wasting time. If we are working, then we think we are worth something.

Some men work too much. Some men work too little.

Proverbs 22:13: "The sluggard says, 'There is a lion outside!' or, 'I will be maimed in the streets!'" Is there really a lion outside? I don't know. But I do know that for a person who does not want to work, any excuse will do.

Let the government work for me. Let the woman in my life work for me. So says the sluggard, ensnared by sloth, not living as he was made to live.

The man who works too much says, "Work is life." The man who works too little says, "Leisure is life." Both paths are snares, leading to death.

The snare of sex. The snare of work. The snare of LEADERSHIP.

This is not the time to sort through all the questions about this, but the Bible is clear about this: men are to be leaders. Especially in the home, and especially in the church, men must lead.

But again, we are drawn to one of two extremes as leaders:

One extreme is domination. Proverbs 26:12 says, "Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

"Yes," says the man. "I am the leader. I see all, and I know all. I will lead as I wish, and no one will cross me. If I say we will eat green eggs and ham three times a day, we will!" That man is ensnared by domination.

The other extreme is abdication. Proverbs 19:18 says, "Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death."

Some men lead badly. Other men do not lead at all. We abdicate our leadership. We are like a king, fleeing a castle, while chaos consumes it.

Maybe this is because we are lazy. Maybe this is because we have been told men are fools, we are starting to believe it, and we are afraid to lead.

Whatever the reason, it is a matter of life and death. The dominating man suffocates the people beneath him, so they slowly wither and die. The abdicating man sleeps, or tinkers, or channel chases, and Solomon says he is becoming a willing party to the death of the one he should be leading.

Sex is good. Work is good. Leadership is good. But as men, we are tempted to misuse these gifts, and be ensnared by death.

So where is life? Hear the Proverb again: "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death."

THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE. FLOWING FROM...the fear of the Lord.

Do you see how Solomon has fit this together? If I am to truly live as a man, that life will flow into me, from the fear of the Lord. As I possess and express the fear of the Lord, I flee the snares of death, and I truly live.

What is the fear of the Lord?

Is it what we might call “afraid fear”? Is it the terrifying realization that God is the judge of my life and my living, and that he grants life and death, and that he holds the keys to heaven and hell?

Yes. That is why the gospel is such good news. Apart from Jesus Christ, we will be consumed by “afraid fear”, then we will one day be consumed by the judgment we fear, in eternal hell.

But in the son of Solomon, in the Savior Solomon looked forward to seeing, in the Savior we look back upon, we need no longer be slaves to “afraid fear.” Jesus has received God’s judgment for my sin on the cross. Through faith in him, I can be confident that life is mine now, and heaven is mine soon. He owns me for his child, I can no longer fear.

So is the “fear of the Lord” just an old phrase from the Old Testament that has nothing to do with us? No, because as we read the Bible, we read about a second kind of fear: “amazed fear”.

This is the tantalizing realization that God is so good, and God is so great. It is awe at who he is, and awe at what he has done, which leads me to want to serve him, all of my days, in every way.

It is like talking with men about “brushes with greatness.” You know: have you ever met or seen somebody famous? For many men, if they describe some brush with greatness, they will describe seeing or meeting an athlete.

“I was standing next to the path to the clubhouse, and there he was: Tiger Woods.”

“I sat down at our table, and over in the corner, was Peyton Manning.”

“I went right up to him, and I talked to A-Rod.”

Normally calm, cool, collected, impossible-to-impress men, slobbering and blabbering, for they have been near someone so great.

The “amazed fear” of the Lord is an awed awareness of the “bigness” of God. He is so great, yet he has been so good in Jesus. So as a man, I have a passion for knowing him and serving him. Just as I would follow that athlete as long as I could, I want to follow Jesus away from the snares of death, and into the paths of life.

The amazed fear of the Lord. So how do men get it? How can men grow in it? Actually, the same way as women. Through worship.

It is the first part of what God is calling us to be in this congregation. Our vision is for this to be a community of worshippers.

Men, worship is not just for women. If you are to possess and express an amazed fear of the Lord, a fear which will turn you from the snares of death, you must be a worshipper.

Think of Solomon’s son David. He struggled with all three of the snares I have described. But his heart returned to the fountain of life, in worship.

Men, I ask you two hard questions.

1. On the day of gathered worship, do you worship? Maybe you are here, but are you really here? Do you meet with God here? Or are your mind and your heart really somewhere else? Do you ask God to guide you to true, real, worship?

2. On the days of scattered living, do you worship?

Personal worship always involves God’s word. Some will read a lot. Some will read a little and meditate. Some will memorize.

Personal worship always involves prayer. Some will pray long. Some will pray less.

Personal worship may involve singing. Personal worship may involve simply contemplating your life, and how Jesus wants you to serve him now. Personal worship may

involve savoring the creation. It's different for different people.

But this is the same: as we worship, we grow in the amazed fear of the Lord, from which flows life.

I do not say this to be legalistic or moralistic. Worship does not save us, and worship does not give us the right to think we are better than others.

But I do say this to encourage us as men to wrestle with how God does provide for life to flow through us. It is through worship. As men, may we have a passion for worship.

The fountain of life flows from the amazed fear of the Lord.

Yet before we are done, let's briefly discover how the fear of the Lord, and the life that flows from it, turns us from those snares of death.

The fear of the Lord is a fountain, FLOWING TO our lives in these areas of sex, work and leadership.

First, sex.

When we live in the amazed fear of the Lord, bathing in the fountain of life, we know a person who is unspeakably greater than some female fantasy, or any female conquest.

We find freedom from so-called "sexual addictions" in Jesus. Our passion for him, drives out those empty, man-made passions.

We find joy in sexual faithfulness before Jesus. With the strength of Jesus, we seek purity before marriage, and in marriage. When we fail, we know the grace of Jesus' forgiveness. As we strive, we know the power of Jesus' help.

In the amazed fear of the Lord, through Jesus, we escape sexual snares that lead to death, and we find life.

Next, work. Do we find life in work? Do we find life in not working?

No. We find life in Jesus. We are secure in him. Work may come and work may go, but this never changes: I am a child of God through Jesus.

Secure in him, I work hard and well, and he is honored in this.

But what other callings do I have as a man? Am I a husband? A father? A son? A grandson? A brother? A church member? A friend?

I will pursue those callings, along with the call to work. I will do this, for I have a passion to be faithful to the Savior who has been so faithful to me.

Then, leadership. Men, do you tend to domination, or abdication?

If I tend to dominate, I will ask Jesus to help me speak less and listen more, order less and serve more, and offer less bluster and more patience.

If I tend to abdicate, I will ask Jesus to give me strength instead of weakness, courage instead of fear, and energy instead of laziness.

I will strive to be a man who possesses and expresses both the courage of my convictions, and the care to bless the people I lead. I will do this because my heart is given to the amazed fear of Jesus.

"The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death."

Do you know that in 1920, men and women in our culture lived almost exactly the same number of years? Now, women live six years longer.

Why? Could it be because more and more, men embrace snares of death, in the areas I have described, and other areas?

I ask again: what makes a man, a real man? Athletic ability? Sexual conquest? Economic success?

Jesus Christ makes a real man, when his life flows from you, in sexual faithfulness, honest work, and strong, loving leadership.

Men, on this Father's Day, what is flowing into you, and what is flowing from you? A fountain of life, or the snares of death?

Is God calling you to true manhood today? How might other men here, help you in this? May Jesus make us more and more, into real men.