PRIDE GOES BEFORE A FALL?

Proverbs 16:18

As we continue our series, Is That Really in the Bible, we’re going to ask that question of the oft-quoted phrase, “Pride goes before a fall.” It sure sounds like Bible, but is it Bible? Let’s see. I invite you to open your Bible to Proverbs 16:18. For the most part, the Proverbs are compact statements crammed full of spiritual wisdom and truth. If we follow their guidance and heed their warnings, the Proverbs can help us wise up to the way things are and the way things work in the world. And our text tells us how pride works in the world. It could kill you. Hear the word of the Lord … (read the text).

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

So “Pride goes before a fall” is in the Bible! Well, yes and no. “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” The Hebrew uses different words for pride and haughty spirit, different words for destruction and fall. “The terse Hebrew of this saying could read, ‘Before destruction, pride, and before stumbling, a haughty spirit.’” The parallelism so often used in Hebrew poetry and wisdom literature would suggest that the two phrases in the verse mean essentially the same thing, that it’s two ways to say one thing. But when we translate it into English, we notice a little difference here. There seems to be a bit more price to pay for pride than a little fall. “Pride goes before destruction,” say the Proverbs, “and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

It’s kind of a shame that the common phrase that comes out of that verse is “pride goes before a fall.” Too bad the phrase we throw around isn’t this one: “Pride goes before destruction.” In English, that packs more punch. It’s the difference between getting hit with a switch and a sledge hammer. It’s the difference between falling over a stone in the path from which you quickly get back up and falling over a cliff from which you never get back up.

An example: Don Shula has more wins than any other coach in NFL history. The only active coach to even be in the ballpark is New England’s Bill Belichick, and he’d still need another 11 seasons or so, winning at a 70% clip, to catch Shula. So Don Shula is kind of a big deal. Shula likes to tell the story of a post-season trip with his wife. They were in a little seaside town in Maine thinking it was one place they could relax anonymously. It was raining when

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1Paul E. Koptak, Proverbs, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 418.
they arrived, so they decided to take in a movie. As they entered the small theater, the movie had not yet started, and the lights were still up. And when the small group of people in the theater saw them, they began to applaud spontaneously. After they sat down, Don leaned over to his wife and said, "I guess there's no place I'm not known." His wife smiled and added, "And loved, dear." A man seated nearby reached over and shook Don's hand. Shula said, "I have to admit I'm kind of surprised that you know me here." The man replied, "Oh, should I know you? We're just happy to see you folks because the manager said he wasn't going to start the movie until at least two more people showed up."

"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." Unfortunately, little "falls" like Don Shula experienced are hardly at the heart of what the wisdom writer is telling us in this proverb. Don't be deceived into thinking that pride is really a harmless thing, something to laugh about, and that the worst it might cost us is an embarrassing situation now and then. No. The wisdom writer is reminding us of the tremendous danger of pride. This proverb is a flashing yellow light. Pride isn't a tricycle wreck; it's a train wreck. And the proverb is warning us that pride leads to destruction.

No wonder the Church Fathers included pride in their list of the seven deadly sins. And pride usually finds its place at the head of the list, the Grand Marshall of a parade that includes entries like the lust float, the giant anger balloon, the greed drum and bugle corps, and the envy marching band. Some parade, huh? And pride leads the way. C. S. Lewis suggests that Pride or Self-Conceit ... "leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind." Lewis went on to write that "by comparison, unchastity, anger, greed, and drunkenness are mere fleabites."

Pride doesn't just go before a fall; it goes before destruction. It can wreck your life and snuff you out.

I

We can generally spot this kind of pride when we see it:

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3Ibid.
Like in politics when politicians overstate their records and take credit for popular decisions as if they made it happen single-handedly. Or like when candidates running for office try to build themselves up by tearing their opponents down.

Or like in racism when people on the basis of skin-color or ethnic heritage believe themselves to be superior to others—like we can actually determine our skin color and ethnicity.

Or like in sports where it’s no longer enough to defeat one’s opponent. Now many players feel the need to taunt after a good play, a big hit, a blocked shot, or a slam-dunk. “Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!” as if they just cured cancer.

Or like in today’s self-esteem culture where children grow up being told not that they are no better or worse than anyone else, but that they are special without any particular achievement to show for it. One writer believes this you-are-special, self-esteem culture contributes to runaway individual debt and to extreme partisanship in today’s politics. If I’m special then I’m entitled, and what I think is smarter than what you think so compromise is out of the question. Ugly, huh?

And it’s ugly when we see it in Bible characters: in Adam and Eve who thought they could know what God knows, in the construction crew who thought they could build a tower up to heaven, in David who felt entitled to another man’s wife (the mother of the man who wrote most of these Proverbs), in the proud Pharisee at the temple whose prayer was a brag-fest to God, and who thought he was so much better than the tax collector who was also at the temple to pray, like the devil who aspired to be God, and like the Sea-beast in Revelation who thinks he could make war against God’s people and win. Ugly, ugly, ugly.

And it’s ugly when we see it in the Christian community—Christian leaders using their power to crush people rather than help people; leaders using their power to advance themselves more than Christ; churches that split and splinter because one side or both sides in a conflict refuse to humble themselves and seek reconciliation. Pride has destroyed plenty of churches along the way, and it’s an ugly thing.

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II

But perhaps pride is ugliest of all when we see it in the mirror. While we have eyes like an eagle and a nose like a beagle to spot pride in others, we go all Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder when it comes to seeing pride in our own lives.

And Proverbs is not talking about the pride that feels good at the completion of a project, or feeling pride when a spouse or a family member does well. We’re talking about self-conceit, the spirit that squeezes God out so you can get more of yourself in. And it’s pervasive in our nature. It’s a sin with which we’ll struggle in varying degrees till the day we die. Do you see it in yourself? I can see it in me.

- When I get angry at someone who corrects me, when I get upset at someone who is dominating (because I’m not getting my two-cents into the conversation), when I hurt because I feel like I’ve been overlooked or undervalued, when I get mad because I was not recognized for my contribution—then it’s my pride that has been stabbed.

- When I try to pass the buck for my mistakes and sins, when I try to blame others for my actions, when I can’t admit that I’m wrong, and when I am always ready to find a thousand excuses for my misbehavior and not a single one for yours—it’s my pride I’m massaging.

- When I sit in judgment on others, when I criticize with a heavy hand and a sharp tongue, when I tear down others so I can feel better about myself, and when I can’t give another person credit for his or her successes—it’s my pride I’m projecting.

- When I think I’m too good or too self-sufficient to ask for help or be served by others, when I must always be the giver and never the receiver—it’s my pride I’m protecting.

- And as strange as this sounds, I can see it when I feel self-pity because self-pity usually says, “Look how much I’ve suffered. Look what a martyr I am, what a hero I am. Can’t you see that in my suffering?”

5Indebted for this insight to John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 302.
never says, “Look at God.” Self-pity is just one more way of saying, “Look at me! Notice me! Recognize me!”

And this pride goes before destruction. I’ve seen it cost people jobs. And it’s a wrecking ball in relationships. I’ve seen pride destroy marriages and get so in between a parent and a child that one or both won’t speak to each other anymore. It can get in the way of friendships too—creating a competitive environment instead of an encouraging one.

And more dangerous yet, pride is a wrecking ball to our relationship with God. When we give pride a place to set itself up in our lives, it always sets itself up to be its own god or to at least be equal to God. If my life is full of self, how can I make a place for God? John the Baptist understood how this works which is why, in speaking of Jesus, he said, “He must increase and I must decrease” (Jn. 3:30). And the degree to which you and I can own that statement speaks volumes about the level of destructive pride in our lives. “Pride goes before destruction.”

III

So is there an antidote to this insidious poison of pride? Yes. And it’s not of your own making, lest you be proud of fixing yourself. The antidote is of God’s making. The antidote is the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins, not the least of which is this sin of pride. The cross assaults our pride by saying, “This is what pride does. It kills the Son of God on a cross.” Our pride is so pervasive that a self-help program can’t cure it, and no man-made medicine is going to cure it either. Nor can you be moral enough or do enough good deeds to earn God’s favor. Only the blood of Jesus who humbled himself and became obedient unto death on a cross is remedy for our pride because pride can’t tread the blood of Jesus very long before it drowns. Jesus absorbed our pride in His body on the cross, and when He died, the power of pride to rule our lives died with Him. Embrace the cross. Cry out for mercy and forgiveness. Humble yourself and admit your need for the crucified Christ. Only Christ and the cross can break the power of pride in our lives.
And then Christ’s resurrection power can give us strength to see and crucify our pride whenever it raises its ugly head in our lives. The power of the living Christ enables us to live humble lives, to live with the “lowly spirit” the very next verse in Proverbs addresses. And how does Christ help us nurture this lowly spirit? Ask Jesus for strength to do things like these:

- Pray and ask God to chip away at your pride and your arrogance.
- Start saying thank you to God and others more often.
- Learn to lose a game without losing your self-worth.
- Spend less time in front of the mirror.
- Obey those in authority over you.
- Quit demanding your own way.
- Let somebody else have the last word.
- Start serving others so you get your eyes off yourself.
- Bite your tongue the next time you start to tear down someone else.
- Quit looking for credit every time you do a good deed.
- Decide that you are not going to be so quick to take offense when somebody criticizes you.
- And quit feeling sorry for yourself as a way to get others to notice you and applaud you for your heroic suffering.

Every time you do one of these things, you are decreasing and Jesus is increasing in your life. Jesus will give you strength to do these things if you’ll humble yourself and ask Him.

And if you are wise, you will seek His help because “pride goes before destruction.”

IV
That’s what’s really in the Bible, because pride goes before more than a fall, before more than a stumble from which we can quickly recover.

Perhaps you’ve heard of the myth of Narcissus, a young man so handsome that he was more taken with his own beauty than with the lovely maidens who were attracted to him. He ignored all his suitors. And he so scorned the nymph Echo, who loved him passionately, that she pined away in loneliness until nothing was left of her but her voice. The goddess Nemesis, a personification of righteous anger, decided to step in. She pronounced this curse on Narcissus: "May he who loves not others love himself." The heart of the handsome one became even more inflamed and consumed with self-love. One day as he bent over a quiet pool of water to get a drink, he saw the reflection of his lovely face and was transfixed. "Now I know," he cried, "what others have suffered from me, for I burn with love of my own self—and yet how can I reach that loveliness I see mirrored in the water?" Leaning over the pool, hypnotized by his reflection, he fell in ... and drowned.

He didn’t fall in only to climb right out again, he drowned. Pride doesn’t just go before a fall; it goes before destruction.

So nail your pride to the cross of Christ ... and live.

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