

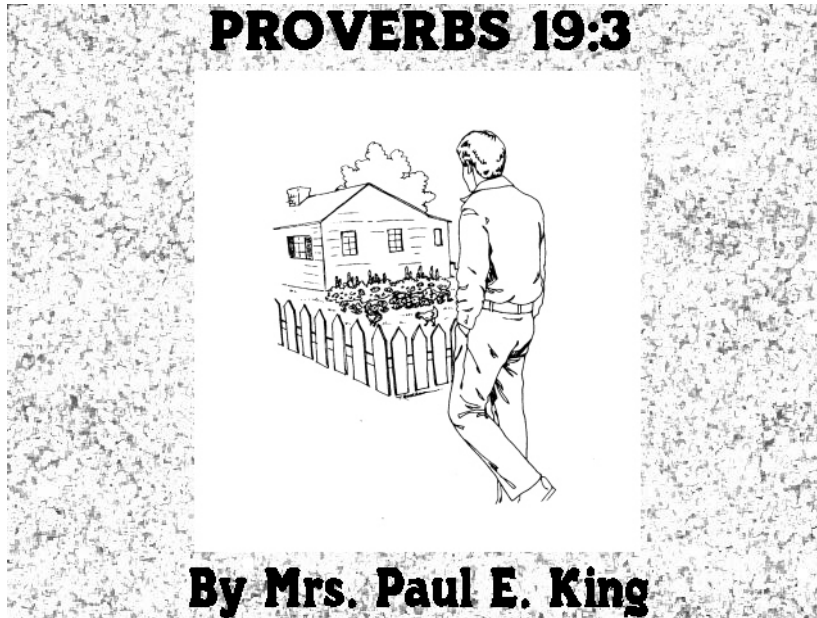
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PROVERBS 19:3
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Stephen cut across the pasture of his father's farm and was soon in the orchard across the road from the house. He almost dreaded going inside the house, knowing full well that he'd get yet another "lecture" from his father. There were times when he could scarcely believe that he was living in the same house in which he'd grown up and been reared for almost nineteen years, so changed and different was the atmosphere lately.

"Three months!" he exclaimed aloud. Then, prayerfully, he sent up a quick plea, "Give me grace and strength, kind Father," he asked as he opened the screen door and stepped into the kitchen, fragrant and sweet smelling with his mother's cooking and baking.

"A bouquet for you," he told his mother as he stepped up behind her and kissed her before giving her the wild azaleas and trilliums he had found in the woods.

"How thoughtful of you, and how very kind, Stephen! Thank you," she said, taking the lovely bouquet and finding a suitable container in which to arrange the beautiful, colorful flowers.

"Where's Father?" Stephen asked quickly.

"I have no idea," came the immediate reply. "He was to have been home an hour ago, as you know."

"Yes, I know."

Placing her hands on her son's shoulders, Mrs. Bristol said kindly and affectionately, "I'm very proud of you, Stephen, and of what you did, by giving your heart to the Lord. You must not allow anything your father may say or do to interfere with your spiritual life nor to deter you on your heavenly journey. Three months ago you did the most noble thing anyone could do."

Breaking down, Stephen sobbed, saying, "You have no idea what those words of encouragement mean to me, Mother. No idea whatever! Why does Dad despise me and hate me so . . . so . . . passionately since I became a Christian and gave my heart to the Lord? He's brutal to me."

"I know, Steve. I know."

"He's cruel," Stephen added. "And downright mean. He never before treated me the way he's treating me now, since I've gotten saved and have been sanctified wholly. Why? You'd think he'd be most thankful that his once-wayward son has had a change of heart and made a complete turn-about."

"Your father is a very proud and strongly self-willed man, dear boy. I need not remind you of this. So long as you were in step with the world and were marching to the drumbeat of Satan, he was proud of you. You were 'in tune' with the sons of his old cronies, doing what they did and going to the same places where they went. It's an embarrassment to him, now that two of us are following the meek and lowly Nazarene and taking the way of the cross."

Stephen felt tears sting his eyes. "I suppose I shouldn't allow it to hurt me so greatly," he said, "for I've seen the pain and sorrow he's caused you since you became converted, Mother; but I guess it's the human part of me that expects better of my father. Do you realize that in all the time I was drinking and doing drugs and living wickedly with my friends my dad was never once unkind or cruel and mean to me. He loved me and seemed proud of me."

"I know, Stephen. That's because his heart has pleasure in sin. The writer of Proverbs declares that 'The foolishness of man perverteth his way: and his heart fretteth against the Lord' Proverbs 19:3. The 'natural man,' the apostle Paul states, 'receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned' I Corinthians 2:14. Your father's eyes are blinded by sin."

"Did I ever tell you what he said to me when I informed him that I was saved?" Stephen asked.

"I guess you didn't; what did he say?"

"He told me he'd much rather have me the way I was than for me to be religious. I was shocked by his statement. I said, 'Dad, you can't mean that!' Vehemently, he said, 'I'd far rather for you to have stayed the way you were. Far rather! At least you were having a good time with your friends.' Imagine this, Mother!

"I told him then that even when I thought I was having fun and a good time, my heart was sad and crying out for something that would satisfy the deep inner hunger and longing which was almost always a part of me."

"What did he say to that?" Mrs. Bristol asked sadly.

"He told me I was a weakling and not a man at all, adding that real men don't have need of a 'gospel crutch,' Dad's words. I replied that I wasn't leaning on a crutch but that I was standing on the Solid Rock Christ Jesus, my Lord and Savior, and that I had a peace in my heart like I never had before; something I never had while on alcohol and drugs.

"To say that Dad was upset is putting it mildly, Mother: he was angry! Mad, would be an even more fitting word. His nostrils dilated fiercely and he turned white with rage. Then he spit on me and told me I was getting just like you and your family and that he didn't like it at all. Not one bit. He said he hated me!"

Tears swam in Mrs. Bristol's eyes. "We must pray more earnestly for his salvation, Stephen. I was frightened when the impact of Proverbs 19:3 settled in upon my soul. The 'foolishness' of your father is 'perverting his way.' I knew what the word pervert meant, but I wanted to see what more the dictionary had to give on its meaning; so I consulted the dictionary and it frightened me even more after reading what I did."

Stephen looked at his mother who was now wiping tears from her eyes. "Don't say it," he told her gently, "if it pains you so."

"I want to, Stephen; it will make it easier for me to bear if I can share it with you. Also, we will see more clearly and deeply our need of more earnest praying for your father."

"All right, Mom, go ahead."

Taking a deep breath, Mrs. Bristol said, "We know that pervert means 'a change from what is natural or normal.'"

Stephen nodded in agreement. That definition meaning was elementary.

"As you know, I took several years of Latin during my schooling," Mrs. Bristol stated. "I told you children this when each of you asked if I had ever studied anything other than English. I enjoyed my Latin classes immensely and I made good grades in it. So, when I saw what the dictionary gave on pervert, as coming from the Latin, I was moved mightily and greatly."

Stephen was suddenly more than alert; he could scarcely wait for his mother's next words.

"Here it is," Mrs. Bristol said, dabbing at her eyes: 'Latin -- per -- to destruction + vertere to turn.' In simple, everyday language it means, to turn to destruction."

"Mother!" Stephen exclaimed. "That's frightening."

"It really is, son. And yet another meaning is to, 'lead or turn from the right way or from the truth.' Also, 'use for wrong purposes or in a wrong way.' There are more meanings, but I was smitten forcibly by the Latin rendering and meaning and also by the one of turning from the right way or from the truth. Stephen, there was a time in your father's life when he went to church and even went forward to be converted."

Stephen gasped in surprise. "Really, Mother?"

"Yes, really and truly, my boy. The sad thing is, he wouldn't pay the price. This is why he resents what you and I have done by becoming Christians.

"We were newly married and so very much in love. I was used to going to church: all my life I had gone with my wonderful parents and my sisters and brothers. Your father's church attendance was a hit and miss thing. But when we married he attended as regularly as I did--until the morning when he went to the altar and God's Holy Spirit pinpointed some things in his life that he'd have to straighten out and make right."

"You . . . mean . . . he . . . he . . .?" Stephen felt sick with the thought that his father refused to obey God's voice and His command.

"He wouldn't do it," Mrs. Bristol said sadly. "He refused. And from that day to this, I have seen what a frightening and fearful thing it is for one to resist and refuse God's voice and to harden one's heart against what the Holy Spirit is gently asking. Businesswise, your father has been a success," the mother stated tearfully; "but spiritually he's a failure. Stephen, your father is on the road to perdition."

"Why have you not told us this before?" Stephen asked, hardly being able to comprehend the fact that his father was not ignorant of spiritual things as he pretended to be. He was quite a skilled pretender and actor, the boy conceded with sadness.

"Why, son? Why haven't I told you before now? Simply because your father had forbidden me to do so. I was afraid of him before I was converted: I took his threats seriously. But since I know the Lord and have Him living within me I am no longer afraid. 'The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.' So states Proverbs 18:10. And since I am filled with God's Holy Spirit, and my heart is pure and clean and full of Divine Love, your father seems to be afraid of me. And with two of us knowing the Lord now and having Him on our side, I think it has overwhelmed him."

Stephen sat like one in shock. His mother reached out and touched his hand, patting it gently, like she did when he was a little boy and had hurt himself. And then the telephone rang.

From the moment he heard the nurse's words, Stephen knew the situation was critical.

"We'll be there as quickly as we possibly can," he said before placing the phone back in place.

"Is . . . Is . . .? Something's wrong with your father, is it not?" Mrs. Bristol asked anxiously.

"Yes, Mother. We must leave immediately for the hospital."

"Is . . . is he dead, Stephen?" The question was little more than a whispered, frightened sound.

"The nurse didn't say. But then, this is standard procedure: They're not allowed to tell. She said it's critical. . . ."

They rode to the hospital's emergency room in silence and were greeted by a doctor whose words told them what their hearts had feared:

"I'm sorry," he said softly and with feeling. "He was dead upon arrival. A massive heart attack, in his car. By the time someone discovered him, slumped over the steering wheel alongside the road, and had him brought here by ambulance, it was too late. I'm sorry.

They clung to each other for a while, weeping, Stephen and his mother, then they left the room where husband and father lay, covered with a sheet.

All the way home, Proverbs 19:3 repeated itself over and over in Stephen's mind: "The foolishness of man perverteth his way: and his heart fretteth against the Lord." And in Latin, the meaning, "to turn to destruction," haunted him.

Suddenly realizing that his father was beyond the reach of prayers and fastings and tears, he clasped his mother's trembling hand in his and said solemnly, "By God's grace, I promise to continue walking on this strait and narrow way until my eyes close in death and my lips are sealed by this grim reaper. I found all that I searched for, and more, in Christ Jesus my Lord. I promise, before God and you, dear Mother, to take the narrow way."

Wiping tears from her eyes, Mrs. Bristol said, "Together, my son, we will take the way of Holiness whether other family members choose to go or not."

"Amen and Amen!" Stephen exclaimed. There was determination in his voice and a fixed purpose in his heart.

In her grief, the mother sensed it. She felt strength and courage and, yes, even comfort by the strongly avowed confirmation.