

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Introduction:

The Book of Proverbs is part of the section of Poetical Books of the Old Testament, which comprise Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. *The Fausset's Bible Dictionary* states: "*The Book of Proverbs* is found in all Jewish lists among the *ketubim*, 'writings' ... the third division of Scripture."

Proverbs and The Book of Proverbs:

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word "Proverb" as: "a pithy popular saying," or "adage," that is "an old familiar saying." Proverbs of that kind are found in the Bible, but not particularly in *The Book of Proverbs*. As an example: "This is why people say, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'"¹ Or "Physician, heal yourself!"² Examples of English proverb are: "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" or: "He is a chip off the old block," or "He missed the boat." Modern-day proverbs are coined in the past and are often used in the present without understanding of the conditions that produced them. The birds in the hand and in the bush do not tell us anything about bird hunting but about financial security. The chip and the block do not refer to wood but to traits that are inherited from parents. Missing the boat has nothing to do with travel.

In our use of proverbs we use symbolic language. That is not the way *The Book of Proverbs* is read. Most of these proverbs mean literally what they say. Although there is poetry in these proverbs, the proverbs are no poems; they are utterances of wisdom. The Hebrew word for "wisdom" is *chokmah*, a word that occurs thirty-nine times in *The Book of Proverbs*. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains that the word signifies "an important element of the Old Testament religious point of view. Religious experience was not a routine, a ritual, or faith experience. It was viewed as a mastery of the art of living in accordance with God's expectations. In their definition, the words 'mastery' and 'art' signify that wisdom was a process of attainment and not an accomplishment. The secular usage bears out the importance of these observations."

Most of the sayings in *The Book of Proverbs* do not belong to the category under we classify proverbs. The proverbs in the Hebrew *Mishleey* are short samples of wisdom of divine origin that offer a key to proper daily living and moral behavior that is acceptable to God. *The Book of Proverbs*, therefore, is a book of wisdom. Some of the Old Testament books are called "Wisdom Literature," such as the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, and certain of the psalms.

Title of the Book:

The Hebrew title of *The Book of Proverbs* is *mishleey*, which is the plural of *mashal*, meaning "a pithy maxim," or "a poem." The word does not always have a positive connotation. We find it in Moses' warning to Israel: "You will become a thing of horror and *an object of scorn* and ridicule to all the nations where the LORD will drive you."³ J. Sidlow Baxter, in his book *Explore the Book*, quotes Arthur T. Pierson, who said: "A proverb is a wise saying in which a few words are chosen instead of many, with a design to condense wisdom into a brief form both to aid memory and stimulate study. Hence proverbs are not only 'wise saying,' but 'dark sayings'—parables, in which wisdom is disguised in a figurative or enigmatic form like a deep well, from which instruction is to be drawn, or a rich mine, from which it is to be dug. Only

1. See I Sam. 10:10; 19:23,24.

2. Luke 4:23

3. Deut. 28:37

profound meditation will reveal what is hidden in these moral and spiritual maxims.” Derek Kidner, in his commentary *Proverbs*, part of *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, writes about the title: “The Heb. term (in the singular, *māsāl*) basically means ‘a comparison’ (e.g. the sharp simile such as – at random – 11:22; 12:4; or the full-grown allegory of Ezk. 17:2 ff.; cf. Jdg. 9:8 ff.), but it came to stand for any kind of sage pronouncement, from a maxim or observation ... to a sermon (e.g. chapter 5), and from a wisecrack (Ezk. 18:2) to a doctrinal revelation (Ps. 49:4).”

Author or Authors:

The Book of Proverbs opens with the word: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* observes about this: “It seemed good to the compilers, however, to repeat, or perhaps retain an older heading, ‘The proverbs of Solomon’ at chapter 10, as if in some special sense the collection there beginning deserved it; and at chapter 25 still another heading occurs: ‘These also are proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.’ All these ascribe the proverbs to Solomon; but the heading (Prov 30:1), ‘The words of Agur the son of Jakeh; the oracle,’ and the heading (31:1), ‘The words of king Lemuel; the oracle which his mother taught him,’ indicate that authorship other than that of Solomon is represented; while the mention of ‘the words of the wise’ (1:6; 22:17), as also the definite heading, ‘These also are sayings of the wise’ (24:23), ascribe parts of the book to the sages in general. The book is confessedly a series of compilations made at different times; confessedly, also, to a considerable extent at least, the work of a number, perhaps a whole guild, of writers.” The same *Encyclopaedia* adds: “That *The Book of Proverbs* is composed of several collections made at different times is a fact that lies on the surface; as many as eight of these are clearly marked, and perhaps subdivisions might be made.” And: “The section Prov 10:1-22:16, with the repeated heading ‘The proverbs of Solomon,’ seems to have been the original nucleus of the whole collection.”

The Book of First Kings makes mention of Solomon’s poetical talents as part of the wisdom God had given to him. We read: “God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite — wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.”¹ In this context the word “wisdom” seems to have the connotation of “talent,” or “skill.”

Ironically, or rather tragically, Solomon, the wisest of Israel’s kings, did not practice what he preached. Toward the end of his life he lost sight of the fact that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” and he became himself one of the “fools [who] despise wisdom and discipline.”

The Message of *The Book of Proverbs*:

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states that *The Book of Proverbs* “is not a portrait-album or a book of manners: it offers a key to life. The samples of behavior which it holds up to view are all assessed by one criterion, which could be summed up in the question, ‘Is this wisdom or folly?’ This is a unifying approach to life, because it suits the most commonplace realms as fully as the most exalted. Wisdom leaves its signature on anything well made or well judged, from an apt remark to the universe itself, from a shrewd policy (which springs from practical insight) to a noble action (which presupposes moral and spiritual discernment). In other words, it is equally at home in the realms of nature and art, of ethics and politics, to mention no others, and forms a single basis of judgment for them all.”

1. I Kings 4:29-34

It is appropriate to state that *The Book of Proverbs* is a book of judgment. It holds up the mirror to us to make us understand how much we have deviated from the course God has set for our lives. James' words could be seen as a commentary on *The Book of Proverbs*: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does."¹

In his commentary *The Proverbs*, Kidner distinguishes eight different themes or subjects: "God and Man," "Wisdom," "The Fool," "The Sluggard," "The Friend," "Words," "The Family," and "Life and Death."

On the subject "God and Man," Kidner observes: "When we open *The Book of Proverbs* at random and take samples of its wisdom, we may gain the impression that its religious content is thin and indefinite. Many of its maxims and theological assertions would transplant into non-Israelite, non-biblical soil, and we are tempted to ask whether anything as specific as a covenant-relationship with God is presupposed here. A hostile reader might go even further, and ask whether the real God and master in this book is not man himself, and the real goal prosperity." The author answers this: "To be sure, Proverbs is concerned to point out that what is right and what pays may travel long distances together; but it leaves us in no doubt which we are to follow when their paths diverge. *E.g.*, on the question of gifts and bribes, it will go as far as to say, without demur, 'A gift ... opens the way for the giver and ushers him into the presence of the great,' (18:16)²; but it will not go a step further. 'A wicked man,' says 17:23, 'accepts a bribe ... in secret to pervert the course of justice'—and it is at once clear that justice, not success, is our proper concern, and that the unscrupulous will get no praise for their fancied wisdom. You have to be good to be wise—though Proverbs is particularly concerned to point out the converse: that you have to be wise to be really good; for goodness and wisdom are not two separable qualities, but two aspects of a single whole. To take it further back, you have to be *godly* to be wise; and this is not because godliness pays, but because the only wisdom by which you can handle everyday things in conformity with their nature is the wisdom by which they were divinely made and ordered. That God is a reality to these writers is confirmed by their sense of sin—a shadow only thrown by some sense of the divine. 'Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin' '? (20:9). In Proverbs this is not the servile uneasiness that the Gentile felt. ... Sin must be put away in practical repentance. ... While all go to God's school, few learn wisdom there, for the knowledge which He aims to instill is the knowledge of Himself; and this, too, is the ultimate prize. In submission to His authority and majesty (that is, in the fear of the Lord) we alone start and continue our education; and by the diligent search for wisdom 'as for hid treasures' we shall find our prize in a growing intimacy with the same Lord. He is the beginning; He is also the end; for the goal is: 'Then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God' (2:5)."

On the subject of wisdom, Kidner explores "The many facets of wisdom," which he divides into five sections. We read: "*The Book of Proverbs* opens by breaking up the plain daylight of wisdom ... into its rainbow of constituent colors. These all shade into one another, and any one of them can be used to represent the whole; yet there is some value in seeing them momentarily analyzed and grouped.

1. *Instruction*, or *training* ... a far from static term, is the first synonym, giving notice that wisdom will be hard-won, a quality of character as much as of mind, sternness, ranging from warning (*e.g.* 24:32) to chastening. ... Its frequent companion is *correction*, or *reproof*, a noun whose derivation emphasizes verbal rather than physical persuasion: and appeal to reason and conscience. ... The two terms together can be summed up as *discipline*; they give the reminder that wisdom is not to be had through extra-mural study: it is for disciples only.

1. James 1:22-25

2. I took the liberty to substitute Kidner's quotations from the KJV with the texts of the NIV.

2. The second synonym in Proverbs 1 is *understanding*, or *insight* ... The background idea (though it is not always prominent) can be gauged from the fact that the verb ‘to discern’ is parent to both nouns, and the proposition ‘between’ is a near relation. Solomon put the two together in 1 Kings 3:9: ‘to *distinguish between* right and wrong’ (Cf. Phil. 1:9,10; Heb. 5:14). Another word (... ‘heart,’ *i.e.* ‘mind’) is also rendered ‘understanding’ in AV and RV, but is better called *sense*, as in RSV: *e.g.* 6:32; 10:13; cf. Ho. 7:11.”

3. The third is *wise dealing*¹ ... *i.e.* good sense, practical wisdom, *savoir-faire*. Its particular character shows in its verb-form, which often means ‘be successful.’ Eve, in the garden, misconceived it as sophistication (Gn. 3:6), but Abigail finely displayed it in her handling of a crisis (1 Sa. 25:3). Its supreme expression (giving the lie to Eve) is in the unworldly triumph of the Servant of the Lord: Isaiah 52:13. At its first appearance in Proverbs it is claimed for the right master by being coupled with ‘righteousness, judgment and equity’ (1:3b).² A companion term is ... *sound wisdom*.

4. In the same range lie the expressions shrewdness³ (... 1:4a) and discretion (... 1:4b) – the former of these seen in enemy hands in Genesis 3:1, and the latter (which means, in C. H. Toy’s words, ‘the power of forming plans’) so often degenerating into mere scheming that it can be used by itself in a bad sense (*e.g.* 12:2) more often than in a good. But these qualities need not be corrupt, and the book is largely concerned to show that the godly man is in the best sense a man of affairs, who takes the trouble to know his way about, and plan his course realistically (*cf.* 22:3: ‘a shrewd man sees danger and hides himself; but the simple go on, and suffer for it’). To use the literal meaning of counsels (... 1:5),⁴ he knows *the ropes*.

5. A fifth group consists of the words *knowledge* ... and *learning* (... 1:5)⁵; the former not so much an informed mind as a knowing of truth and indeed of God Himself (2:5; 3:6), and the latter tending to emphasize that doctrine is something given and received, or grasped.”

The Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary warns: “In reading *The Book of Proverbs*, we need to make sure we do not turn these wise sayings into literal promises. Proverbs are statements of the way things generally turn out in God’s world. For example, it is generally true that those who keep God’s commandments will enjoy ‘length of days and long life’ (3:2). But this should not be interpreted as an ironclad guarantee. It is important to keep God’s laws, no matter how long or short our earthly life may be.

Outline of *The Book of Proverbs*:

Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary gives us the following outline of the book:

I.	The Purpose of Proverbs	1:1-7
II.	Proverbs to the Youth	1:8—9:18
	A. Obey Parents	1:8-9
	B. Avoid Bad Company	1:10-19
	C. Seek Wisdom	1:20—2:22
	D. Benefits of Wisdom	3:1-26
	E. Be Kind to Others	3:27-35
	F. Security in Wisdom	4:1-13
	G. Avoid the Wicked	4:14-22

1. NIV: “prudent life.”

2. NIV: doing what is right and just and fair.

3. NIV: prudence.

4. NIV: guidance.

5. In a footnote the author adds: “The word *leqah* is derived from the verb ‘to take’; hence it can also mean in some contexts ‘persuasiveness,’ as in 7:21a; 16:21,23; *cf.* our expression: ‘very taking.’”

H.	Keep Your Heart	4:23-27
I.	Do Not Commit Adultery	5:1-14
J.	Be Faithful to Your Spouse	5:15-23
K.	Avoid Surety	6:1-5
L.	Do Not Be Lazy	6:6-19
M.	Do Not Commit Adultery	6:20—7:27
N.	Praise of Wisdom	8:1—9:12
O.	Avoid Folly	9:13-18
III.	Proverbs of Solomon	10:1—24:34
	A. Proverbs Contrasting the Godly and the Wicked	10:1—15:33
	B. Proverbs Encouraging Godly Lives	16:1—22:16
	C. Proverbs Concerning Various Situations	22:17—24:34
IV.	Proverbs of Solomon Copied by Hezekiah’s Men	25:1—29:27
	A. Proverbs Regulating Relationships with Others	25:1—26:28
	1. Relationships with Kings	25:1-7
	2. Relationships with Neighbors	25:8-20
	3. Relationships with Enemies	25:21-24
	4. Relationships with Yourself	25:25-28
	5. Relationships with Fools	26:1-12
	6. Relationships with Sluggards	26:13-16
	7. Relationships with Gossips	26:17-28
	B. Proverbs Regulating Various Activities	27:1—29:27
V.	The Words of Agur	30
VI.	The Words of King Lemuel	31
	A. Wisdom for Leaders	31:1-9
	B. Wise Woman	31:10-31

Analysis:

I. The Purpose of Proverbs 1:1-7

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

2 for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight;

3 for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair;

4 for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young —

5 let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance —

6 for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

The Commentary *Geneva Notes* introduces *The Book of Proverbs* with: “The wonderful love of God toward his Church is declared in this book: for as much as the sum and effect of the whole Scriptures is here set forth in these brief sentences, which partly contain doctrine, and partly manners, and also exhortations to both: of which the first nine chapters are as a preface full of grave sentences and deep mysteries, to assure the hearts of men to the diligent reading of the parables that follow: which are left as a precious jewel to the Church, of those three thousand parables mentioned in 1 Kings 4:32 and were gathered and committed to writing by Solomon’s servants and incited by him.”

It is obvious that wisdom did not begin and end with Solomon. The Book of Job demonstrates that an appreciation for wisdom and a thirst for understanding the mysteries of life existed long before Solomon was born. Archeological finds testify to the fact that the Babylonians were far ahead of their time in their comprehension of the universe. We still honor them in the division of our day in 24 hours of 60 minutes,

divided into 60 seconds per minute. Also the fact that the rumor about Solomon's wisdom spread to neighboring nations is an indication of the fact that wisdom was valued. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states: "The rapid spread of Solomon's reputation, and the flocking of foreign visitors to hear him (I Ki. 4:34; 10:1-13, 24), illustrate the intellectual climate of the time both outside and within Israel. It was a common thing for sages to visit foreign courts and test each other's wit and wisdom."

Wisdom was God's coronation gift to Solomon. We read that Solomon had a dream in which God asked him what he wanted as he ascended the throne of Israel. Solomon answered: "I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" We read that God was pleased with Solomon's request and answered him: "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for — both riches and honor — so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life. Then Solomon awoke — and he realized it had been a dream."¹

It must be stated that only wise people ask for wisdom. It takes intelligence and insight to know what our real needs are. Very few people, if any, face the challenges Solomon faced as he became king of Israel, but we must all chart our way through life and the realization of the cliffs that must be avoided and the snares that must be escaped ought to make us voice a request similar to Solomon's. God is willing to share with us a wisdom of which Solomon's was a mere shadow. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."² And Jesus testified about Himself: "One greater than Solomon is here."³

We do well, when reading *The Book of Proverbs*, to keep in mind the connection between the wisdom King Solomon of old shares with us and the One who is our wisdom from God, our Savior Jesus Christ. Wisdom in the life of a child of God begins with redemption and expresses itself in holiness and righteousness.

There are several Hebrew words in the opening verses of *The Book of Proverbs* that demand our special attention if we want to understand what God is saying to us. The proverbs are given to us "for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion."

The first word is *chokmah*, which is the common word for "wisdom," or "skill." Living the life God intends for us to live requires skill. We live in a dangerous world in which some spiritual powers are out to destroy us. Jesus says: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."⁴ The Greek word rendered "to the full" is *perissos*, which has the meaning of being "superabundant" or "superior." God does not want us to float through life aimlessly and merely exist or vegetate; He has destined us to live existentially and eternally, life on the highest plane.

The second Hebrew word, rendered "discipline" is *muwcar*, which conveys the idea of "restraint" and even "chastisement." The Apostle Paul compares the Christian life with an athletic achievement. We are to live like participants in the Olympics. He wrote to the Corinthians: "I beat my body and make it my slave

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1. See I Kings 3:4-15.
 2. I Cor. 1:30
 3. Matt. 12:42
 4. John 10:10

so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”¹ And to the church in Thessalonica: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”² God expects us to use self-discipline to get in shape and if we do not practice that discipline, He is willing to impose it upon us by way of chastisement. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elaborates on this: “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”³ God’s goal with our life is *that we may share in His holiness*, that is that we may inherit His glory. In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis writes: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks to us in our circumstances, but He shouts to us in our pain.”

The third word is *biynah*, meaning, “perfect understanding.” How practical this is, is clear from the verse, in which the same word is used, which speaks of “the men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”⁴

The fourth word *sakal* refers to the kind of wisdom that makes one successful. We find it in the verse: “Whatever Saul sent him to do, David did it so successfully that Saul gave him a high rank in the army.”⁵

The fifth word, “doing what is right” is the translation of one single Hebrew word *tsedeq*, rendered “justice” in the King James Version. It carries the meaning of that which is naturally, morally or legally right. There is also a notion of prosperity in it. In the Old Testament “prosperity” covered more than material advantage. The material aspect was an expression of a spiritual condition. In Leviticus the word is used in connection with court cases as in the verse: “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.”⁶ In the context of business we read: “Your scales and weights must be accurate. Your containers for measuring dry goods or liquids must be accurate. I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”⁷

“Just and fair” is the rendering of the words *mishpat* and *meysnar*, meaning “a verdict,” covering the whole legal process, including the act, the place, the suit, the crime, and the penalty, and a participant’s right or privilege, and “straightness, or “rectitude.” As we can see some words overlap each other in meaning.

All this is for the purpose of “giving prudence to the simple,” and “knowledge and discretion to the young.” “The simple,” *pethiy* in Hebrew, is someone who, according to a footnote in the NIV, is “without

1. I Cor. 9:27
2. I Thess. 4:3,4,7
3. Heb. 12:4-11
4. I Chron. 12:32
5. I Sam. 18:5
6. Lev. 19:15
7. Lev. 19:36 (New Living Translation)

moral direction and inclined to evil.” The word occurs at least thirteen times in *The Book of Proverbs*. The word “prudence” *ormah* in Hebrew, is a synonym for wisdom, but it has the added meaning of “subtlety.” Jesus used the New Testament equivalent when He said to His disciples: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”¹

The “knowledge,” *da`ath*, a young man is to acquire, is the skill needed to live according to the will of God. The word is used in connection with the skill of craftsmanship, as in the verses: “See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts — to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.”²

The last word is *mezimmah*, which means “a plan.” In this context it has obviously a positive connotation, but it can also mean an evil plot as in Job’s answer to his friends: “I know full well what you are thinking, the schemes by which you would wrong me.”³

The wisdom of Proverbs is not only for the young and inexperienced but also for those who have traveled the road for years and have gained considerable experience. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “True wisdom is never stationary, but always progressive; because it secures the ground behind it as a basis for further advances.” The “discerning” are those who use their judgment “to separate mentally” between what is right and wrong, between what is better and best. Joseph advised Pharaoh to “look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt.”⁴ And Pharaoh understood immediately that someone who gave such advice qualified to be that man. The wise man is the one who understand that he has to use a compass to correct his course in life from time to time. That is the meaning of the Hebrew word *tachbulah*, which the KJV renders “wise counsel” and the NIV “guidance.” It is a word that refers to the steering of a ship. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The principle here enunciated is again stated in ... Proverbs 9:9, ‘Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser,’ and finds expression under the gospel economy in the words of our Lord, ‘For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance.’”⁵

The material to be learned is described as “proverbs and parables, sayings and riddles.” The Hebrew word for riddle is *chiydah*, which has thrown many Bible scholars for a loop. We find it in the rebuke God gave to Aaron and Miriam when they opposed Moses’ leadership and God defended him: “With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”⁶ It is used for the riddle Samson gave to solve to the Philistines on his wedding feast.⁷ And Habakkuk prophesied: “Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying, ‘Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on?’”⁸ The KJV uses the words “a taunting proverb.”

The use of words points into the direction of a cultural exercise that is particular to Middle East culture. Asking questions in the form of a riddle for the purpose of making the other party understand the hidden meaning of words became the equivalent of the knights’ sharpening their swords for a hand-to-hand

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1. Matt. 10:16
 2. Ex. 31:2-5
 3. Job 21:27
 4. Gen. 41:33
 5. Matt. 13:12; Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18; 14:26
 6. Num. 12:8
 7. See Judges 14:12-19.
 8. Hab. 2:6

combat. In Tolkien's series *Lord of the Rings*, the hobbit Bilbo gets into such a verbal skirmish with a corrupted member of his own species, Gollum, for the price of Bilbo's life. The conversation between Mao Dze Dung, China's chairman of the Communist Party, and President Marcos of the Philippines, consisted of an exchange of riddles, which was only understood by a few initiated. The political stakes of this meeting were high. The Israelites must have practiced this kind of exchanges. The conversation between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba probably consisted primarily in this sort of verbal virtuosity.

That which is a form of high entertainment among humans, leads to the ultimate and most serious form of wisdom: the fear of the Lord. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." Solomon did not invent that saying. We find it first in The Book of Job where Job quotes God and says: "And he said to man, 'The fear of the Lord — that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.'"¹ And the writer of Psalm 111 formulated the thought: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise."²

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes about this "motto" of Proverbs: "This is also the motto of the Wisdom writings in general, and reappears, in substance, in 9:10; 15:33; Psalm 111:10; Job 28:28. *The beginning* (i.e. the first and controlling principle, rather than a stage which one leaves behind; cf. Ec. 12:13) is not merely a right method of thought but a right relation: a worshipping submission (*fear*) to the God of the covenant, who has revealed Himself by the name (*the Lord*, i.e. Yahweh: Ex. 3:13-15). *Knowledge*, then, in its full sense, is a relationship, dependent on revelation and inseparable from character ('wisdom and training' 7b). When we fence off (as we must) limited fields of knowledge for special study, the missing context must be remembered, or our knowing is precocious and distorted, as at the Fall, and we end by knowing less (cf. 3:7; Rom. 1:21,22), not more."

Eugene E. Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases v. 7: "Start with God—the first step in learning is bowing down to GOD; only fools thumb their noses at such wisdom and learning." A footnote in the NIV states: "The Hebrew words rendered fool in Proverbs, and often elsewhere in the Old Testament, denote one who is morally deficient." Fear of the Lord means primarily recognition of God's supremacy. It is the ultimate reality test. Severing the relationship with God, which is what our first parents did, means escape from reason and losing the point of reference which determines all moral conduct.

II. Proverbs to the Youth 1:8—9:18

A. Obey Parents 1:8-9

8 Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

9 They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.

There is an immediate relation between recognition of God's authority and acknowledgment of parental authority. The fifth commandment of the Ten Commandments is "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."³ This commandment stands at the beginning of all human relationships. The Apostle Paul emphasizes this in his epistles: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'-which is the first

1. Job 28:28

2. Ps. 111:10

3. Ex. 20:12

commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’

”¹ And: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”²

A parent’s responsibility toward his or her children is to live a life of righteousness and model fellowship with God. The only effective preaching is the example. God’s pattern for family life is that a child receive the notion of divine love in the strong protecting love of the father and the warm emotional affection of the mother. In many instances, though not in all, the moral misbehavior of a teenager can be traced to the fact that he or she received the wrong signals in early childhood. The Apostle Paul tracked down Timothy’s faith to the intimacy his mother and grandmother had with God. In his second letter to his spiritual son, he wrote: “I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.”³ In many of the scriptural examples in which a father impresses upon his son the need for righteous living, we do not see a convincing model of a father-son relationship. Jacob’s “blessing” of his sons on his deathbed, reads like a mixture of dark doom with some traces of light.⁴ Little else could be expected in that dysfunctional family. One wonders what impression Solomon’s words must have made upon his son. When Rehoboam ascended the throne of Israel he failed to evince any of his father’s proverbial wisdom.

This does not mean that all moral failures of children can be blamed on parents. I have known parents who lived righteously and had loving relationships with their children and who have seen their children forsake all of their spiritual heritage. Ultimately, every child is responsible for establishing his own relationship with God. The psalmist promises: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.”⁵ But in cases where the child does follow his or her parents’ intimacy with the Lord it is like a succession in a monarchy. To wear the garland of grace means receiving power to face life’s challenges victoriously, as Paul expresses in Romans: “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”⁶

The Pulpit Commentary comments on these verses: “The form of address here adopted was that in common use by teachers towards their pupils, and marks that superintending, loving, and fatherly care and interest which the former felt in and towards the latter. It occurs frequently in the introductory section (...Proverbs 2:1; 3:1, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1), and reappears again towards the close (...Proverbs 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11) in the teacher’s address. The mother of Lemuel uses it (...Proverbs 31:2) in the strictly parental sense. In other passages of the Old Testament the teacher, on the other hand, is represented as a ‘father’ (...Judges 17:10 ...Isaiah 10:12; ...2 Kings 2:21). We find the same relation assumed in the New Testament, both by St. Paul (...1 Corinthians 4:15; ...Philemon 1:10; ...Galatians 4:19) and by St. John (...1 John 2:1; 5:2); but under the economy of the gospel it has a deeper significance than here, as pointing to the ‘new birth,’ which, being a later revelation, lies outside the scope of the moral teaching of the Old Testament dispensation.”

1. Eph. 6:1-3

2. Col. 3:20

3. II Tim. 1:5

4. See Gen. 49:1-28.

5. Ps. 27:10

6. Rom. 5:17

B. Avoid Bad Company 1:10-19

10 My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them.

11 If they say, "Come along with us; let's lie in wait for someone's blood, let's waylay some harmless soul;

12 let's swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the pit;

13 we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder;

14 throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse" —

15 my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths;

16 for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood.

17 How useless to spread a net in full view of all the birds!

18 These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves!

19 Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the lives of those who get it.

We can hardly imagine a scriptural admonition that is more relevant for modern young people than this warning against joining a gang. Not only in today's big cities but also in many high schools the peer pressure upon youth to join the hooligans is overwhelming. In many instances this seems to be the only way of survival. Eugene H. Peterson's *The Message* modernizes this beautifully: "Dear friend, if bad companions tempt you, don't go along with them. If they say—'Let's go out and raise some hell. Let's beat up some old man, mug some old woman. Let's pick them clean and get them ready for their funerals. We'll load up on top-quality loot. We'll haul it home by the truckload. Join us for the time of your life! With us, it's share and share alike!'—Oh, friend, don't give them a second look; don't listen to them for a minute. They're racing to a very bad end, hurrying to ruin everything they lay hands on. Nobody robs a bank with everyone watching. Yet that's what these people are doing—they're doing themselves in. When you grab all you can get, that's what happens: the more you get, the less you are."

The antidote to peer pressure is the fear of the Lord. We can only say "no" to evil if we have said "yes" to God. Moses warned the people of his day: "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong."¹ It is always easier to follow the majority than to swim against the current. One needs the vision of a goal in life to know the direction.

In presenting temptation as leading a life of crime, the father uses extreme examples. Most choices in life are made on a lower and seemingly less important level. If we practice the fear of the Lord in the details of daily life, the Holy Spirit will guide us in our more dramatic decision-making.

The Hebrew word rendered "do not give in" is *'al 'abah*, meaning: "do not acquiesce." There are circumstances in which we can be forced to do things we do not want to do. But no one can force us to surrender our integrity. Even if it is a matter of life and death, it still remains our choice. When fear interferes with our choices, we must remember Jesus' admonition: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."²

C. Seek Wisdom 1:20—2:22

20 Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares;

21 at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech:

1. Ex. 23:2

2. Matt. 10:28

22 "How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?

23 If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you.

24 But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand,

25 since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke,

26 I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you —

27 when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

28 "Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me.

29 Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the LORD,

30 since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke,

31 they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

32 For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them;

33 but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm."

2:1 My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you,

2 turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding,

3 and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding,

4 and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure,

5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

6 For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

7 He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,

8 for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.

9 Then you will understand what is right and just and fair — every good path.

10 For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

11 Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.

12 Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse,

13 who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways,

14 who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil,

15 whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways.

16 It will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words,

17 who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God.

18 For her house leads down to death and her paths to the spirits of the dead.

19 None who go to her return or attain the paths of life.

20 Thus you will walk in the ways of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous.

21 For the upright will live in the land, and the blameless will remain in it;

22 but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the unfaithful will be torn from it.

In this last section of the first chapter, wisdom is impersonated as a woman, while in the second chapter the father speaks again to his son. Since all wisdom originates in God, we may draw the conclusion that the character of wisdom is both masculine and feminine. This is confirmed in the story of the creation of man. The Genesis account tells us: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."¹

The fatherly advice in the previous section depicted the extreme to which a life of bad choices could lead. Most of the present verses are addressed to those who have already made some bad choices but who have not yet seen the ultimate consequences. Lady Wisdom calls them back and urges them to reconsider. She uses three names for the audience she addresses: "simple ones," "mockers," and "fools."

1. Gen. 1:27

Eugene H. Peterson in *The Message* calls them: “Simpletons,” “Cynics,” and “Idiots.” The Hebrew words are respectively *pethiy*, meaning “silly,” *luwts*, a word that literally means: “to make mouths at,” sometimes used to indicate someone who tries to pronounce words in a foreign language, usually a mocker, and *keciyl*, which means: “fat,” or “stupid.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “In the order there is a progression from the least to the most culpable.”

The Tyndale Commentary observes: “This passage is the first of many in which wisdom is personified; the most far-reaching of these is chapter 8. Here the open proclamation, heard above the noise of the market, significantly balances the domesticity of verse 8, to make it clear that the offer of wisdom is to the man in the street, and for the business of living, not to an élite for the pursuit of scholarship.”

Lady Wisdom asks the question “how long?” which the NIV repeats twice although the Hebrew text only has it once. The implication of the question is that the possibility of return exists at least for a period of time. That there is a point of no return is obvious from God’s dealing with Pharaoh of whom we read that he kept on hardening his heart till God hardened it. In the Book of Exodus we read at least six times that Pharaoh hardened his heart before we read for the first time that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.¹ The prodigal son in Jesus’ parable shows us the example of a person who discovered his own stupidity and decided to do something about it. We read that he came to his senses and said: “I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”²

Both Lady Wisdom and the father of the prodigal show us that living a life of moral rectitude is a matter of the right relationship. Wisdom proclaims: “I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you.” That speaks of intimacy in the same way as the father who “was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” The Hebrew text, as rendered in *Young’s Literal Translation*, reads: “Turn back at my reproof, lo, I pour forth to you my spirit, I make known my words with you.” This may sound less romantic and intimate but there is no deeper intimacy than intimacy of spirit. In giving us His Spirit, God shares with us the essence of Himself. Refusing God’s offer of intimacy, therefore, has such dire consequences. By turning down God’s compromise of the Holy Spirit we hurt Him more deeply than any human being can be hurt by spurned love. This explains the rather harsh sounding words in vv. 26 and 27. God does not find pleasure in our disasters and calamities, but if we withdraw from the protection He is willing to give us the results are our responsibility, not His. A relationship with God is like a legal bond of marriage. As the husband is legally obligated to protect his wife and care for her, so does God take responsibility for our protection if we respond to His offer of intimacy. But when a wife sues for divorce, the husband’s responsibilities cease to be.

Peterson’s *The Message* expresses this in a most lively way:

“Since you laugh at my counsel and make a joke of my advice, How can I take you seriously?
I’ll turn the tables and joke about *your* troubles!
What if the roof falls in, and your whole life goes to pieces?
What if catastrophe strikes and there’s nothing to show for your life but rubble and ashes?
You’ll need me then.
You’ll call for me, but don’t expect an answer.
No matter how hard you look, you won’t find me.”

We note that in vv. 28-33 Wisdom no longer speaks to those who have gone astray but she has turned away from them and addresses the bystanders. The suggestion in this change of audience is that there is a public warning in the example of those who lost their chance of making the right decisions at the right

1. See Ex. 7:13,22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7 (34); 10:1).

2. Luke 15:18,19

time. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks: “The change in this verse from the second to the third person is striking. It implies that Wisdom thinks fools no longer worthy of being addressed personally.” Wisdom’s language has an urgency that does not always come through clearly in the English translation. “They will look” is the rendering of the Hebrew word *shachar*, which has the meaning of getting up early in order to do something that is urgent. The word refers to the dawn of the day. We find the word in the psalm David wrote when he was, both physically and spiritually, dying of thirst in the desert: “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”¹

In “they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes” Wisdom expresses the general principle of life that we reap what we sow. The Apostle Paul picks up this theme in his Epistle to the Galatians: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”²

The last two verses of Chapter One conclude Wisdom’s speech by contrasting the state of those who ignore her warning and those who take her words to heart. The Hebrew reads literally: “For the turning away of the simple shall slay them and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them.” *The Pulpit Commentary* draws our attention to a different rendering of this phrase in the Septuagint: “For because they wronged the young, they shall be slain.” *The Commentary* observes that the Arabic uses the same wording. It continues: “The turning away is from the warnings and invitations of Wisdom, and implies *rebelliousness* against God.” The Living Bible reads: “For you turned away from me-to death; your own complacency will kill you. Fools!” Peterson’s *The Message* is even more dramatic: “Don’t you see what happens, you simpletons, you idiots? Carelessness kills; complacency is murder.”

The interesting Hebrew word is *shalvah*, which the KJV renders: “prosperity,” the NIV “complacency.” The literal meaning is “security,” either genuine or false. We find it in the positive sense in the verse in which the Psalmist sings about Jerusalem: “May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.”³ The word evidently speaks about the effect affluence has upon our sense of safety. We feel secure if we have enough money so that there is no need to trust the Lord to provide. It is this false sense of security that, according to Wisdom, kills us spiritually. Like in Jesus’ Parable of the Sower, “the deceitfulness of wealth chokes” the seed of the Word in the human heart.⁴ Seeking affluence can be the equivalent of suicide.

On the other hand, listening to Wisdom’s warnings provides an antidote against fear. The Hebrew word *shama*, which the KJV renders “hearken” has the meaning of “to hear intelligently,” implying obedience. We find it in that sense in the verse “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.”⁵

It is not for nothing that the voice that speaks here is called *Wisdom*. Obeying the words of Wisdom presupposes understanding what wisdom is. In our listening to Wisdom’s words, we use both our intelligence, that is our gift of discernment between what is good or bad, wise or foolish, and our choice to follow the one and reject the other. Actually, that choice is made before we hear the voice. God rarely speaks for guidance to those who have not surrendered to Him first. It is the wise choice that allows us to hear wise words.

1. Ps. 63:1

2. Gal. 6:7,8

3. Ps. 122:7

4. See Matt. 13:22.

5. Ex. 19:5

The fruit of obedience will be a life of ease, safety, and absence of fear. “Ease” may be different from the meaning we often attach to the word. In our use of the word in modern speech, we often attach a comfortable sum of money to it. The life of ease God provides for us does not necessarily imply an abundance of earthly goods, but it does supply the lack of care and worry that comes with a comfortable income. How much more safety do we need than God’s assurance that underneath us are the everlasting arms?

The male voice speaking in Chapter Two picks up the theme of wisdom in the previous section, speaking to a son who stands at the beginning of his life and who has not made any wrong choices yet. This is not a call to those who lost their way but a word of advice for one who sets his first steps on his path through life. We do not know the age of this boy. The fact that there is a warning against sexual temptation suggests that he is a teenager. But children usually begin to understand the difference between right and wrong earlier in life and most children begin to ask questions long before their entrance into puberty. Most children also believe that their father has all the answers. This father makes it clear that he does not, but he refers his son to the One who has.

The most significant part of the advice he gives to his child is that it is important to search for the right answers. This seems to be a logical premise, but it is also true that we tend to hear only what we want to hear. This father tells his son that if he spends the same kind of effort in getting the right answers, as other people do to become rich, he will acquire the greatest riches life has to offer. In the Preface of his book *Be Skillful*, Warren W. Wiersbe writes: “*The Book of Proverbs* is about godly wisdom, how to get it and how to use it. It’s about priorities and principles, not get-rich-quick schemes or success formulas. It tells you, not how to make a living, but how to be skillful in the lost art of making a life.”

The basic questions in life can be reduced to “What do we want?” and “How seriously do we want it?” In this young Solomon set the right example when he said to God: “So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”¹ He must have learned this from his father, who wrote: “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.” In building the house of our life nothing is more important than the right foundation. The father in these verses defines wisdom primarily as “the fear of the Lord” and “the knowledge of God.” In this he returns to the principle upon which the whole Book of Proverbs is built.

In his commentary *Proverbs*, Derek Kidner remarks: “With these two phrases verse 5 encompasses the two classic Old Testament terms for true religion – the poles of awe and intimacy.” When we speak of “poles” we understand fear and intimacy to be extreme opposites. It is difficult for us to imagine that we could experience both simultaneously. In a way wisdom is bipolar; bipolarity is its source. What I mean is that we will become wise if we keep in mind that God is the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth and of all life, and at the same time love His Person as we love no one else. During His life on earth, Jesus Christ gave us the example in His relationship with the Father and He could say about Himself: “One greater than Solomon is here.”² Our treasure hunt for wisdom will make us wise. The Apostle Paul defines wisdom in terms of our relationship with Jesus Christ: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”³

The “lesser” Solomon speaks of wisdom as a tool for victory, protection, and guidance. Putting these definitions together makes us understand our potential for going astray. The protection we need first and foremost is protection against ourselves. The seeds of crookedness and perversion are in our own heart and unless we allow ourselves to be placed “in Christ Jesus” we will not know “righteousness, holiness and redemption.” The fact that we are sexual beings makes us vulnerable to sexual temptation. We need the

1. I Kings 3:9
2. Matt. 12:42
3. I Cor. 1:30

victory of Jesus Christ to be able do what Job did who said: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.”¹

Placing ourselves under the protection of God’s wisdom will help us find the way through life. Jesus compared life with entering through a gate and walking on a path. In *The Sermon on the Mount*, He said: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”² Entering through the gate stands for making a choice and walking on the road represents the life we lead as a result of our choice. The smallness of the gate suggests that the choice is not easy. The excess baggage we try to carry through life inflates us to the point where we are unfit to squeeze through. The choice for the small gate means giving up what we want to hang on to.

The Book of Proverbs warns us against easy choices. But, as Wisdom states, making the right choice “will be pleasant to your soul.” Before we feel good we must think right. God’s wisdom will make us “understand what is right and just and fair.” The Hebrew words rendered “right,” “just” and “fair” are *tsedeq*, *mishpat* and *meysnar*. *Tsedeq* conveys the idea of something being naturally, morally or legally right. *Mishpat* literally means “a verdict.” It refers to divine law, built into our soul in the same way as the laws of nature are in creation in general. *Meysnar* means “evenness,” “concord,” or “rectitude.” The three words together provide a sense of harmony. The word “discretion,” *mezimmah* in Hebrew, usually has a derogatory meaning. We find it in Job’s accusation of his friends: “I know full well what you are thinking, *the schemes* by which you would wrong me.”³ It speaks of a shrewdness that is more often found in bad people than in good ones. But Jesus recommended that we follow the example of the wicked, not in what they do but in how they do it. In the conclusion of His Parable of the Dishonest Manager He said: “The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”⁴ Jesus Himself demonstrated this shrewdness over and over again in His conversations with those who opposed Him, outwitting their trick questions with the most brilliant answers.

There seem to be three kinds of people in the last section of this chapter: evil men (v. 12), adulteresses (v. 16), and good men (v. 20). The word “men,” however, is not found in vv. 12 and 20. Most translations provide it for the purpose of good reading. V. 16 uses the Hebrew words *ishshah zuwr*, literally meaning “the woman who turns aside,” suggesting adultery. The implication seems to be that the principle of behavior is emphasized more than the person who does it. If that pertains to “the perverseness of evil” and “blamelessness” we may assume it relates to the principle of adultery also. It is not so much the seducing woman as the breaking of the vows that is emphasized. No distinction is made between male and female behavior but between integrity of the soul and unreliability, which is called “perverseness” in this context.

These verses run parallel to the advice given in Chapter 1:10-19, where the act is more elaborated than the principle. In the first section the father emphasized the dangers that should be avoided, in these verses he shows how this can be done through wisdom’s divine empowerment.

In vv. 16-19 it is the girl who tries to seduce the boy. This is not the place to discuss whether the paradigm is slanted in favor of male innocence. We know from daily life that seduction can also go in the opposite direction, and most unbiased opinions will state that the boy will take the initiative more often than the girl. We must remember that it is a father-son-talk. Having already warned his son against male perversion, it may be understood that a boy ought to treat the opposite sex with respect.

The principle emphasized in these verses is the inviolability of the marriage vows. The woman who is introduced here as “strange woman” is a stranger to God in that she is outside the covenant relationship

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1. Job 31:1
 2. Matt. 7:13,14
 3. Job 21:27
 4. Luke 16:8

God has with Israel. We find the same word in the verse: “And they shall eat those things wherewith the atonement was made, to consecrate and to sanctify them: but *a stranger* shall not eat thereof, because they are holy.”¹ Another instance in which the word *zuvr* is used is: “Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered *unauthorized* fire before the LORD, contrary to his command.”² God who created us as sexual beings intends us to behave as such within the limits He has set. Since sexual relationships are meant to be much more than a physical union between a male and a female, and since they are to express the ultimate relationship between the Creator and His creation, the devil has directed his heaviest barrages upon that facet of human life. Corruption of sexual behavior is the worst kind of distortion of the divine in us. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The morality of the Proverbs always represents monogamy as the rule, it deprecates illicit intercourse, and discountenances divorce. It is in entire accordance with the seventh commandment. The woman who commits adultery offends, not only against her husband, but against her God.”

We ought to be careful, though, not to limit the meaning of these warnings to physical or sexual temptation. As sex is meant to be an expression of love and commitment and not a mere physical act, it also represents more than erotic love. Ultimately we will express our love and commitment to God on the level of *agape*, of which *eros* is a shadow.

This section ends with a reference to “living in the land,” a theme David developed in detail in Psalm Thirty-seven.³ Jesus infinitely extended the boundaries of the Promised Land in the beatitude: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”⁴ These verses also play the theme that is introduced in Psalm One in which the two paths through life and their ultimate destination are traced: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked ... But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. ... Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away...”⁵ The good and the righteous are those who allow the Holy Spirit to do His regenerating work in their lives.

D. Benefits of Wisdom 3:1-26

- 1 My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart,**
- 2 for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity.**
- 3 Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.**
- 4 Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.**
- 5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;**
- 6 in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.**
- 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.**
- 8 This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.**
- 9 Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops;**
- 10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.**
- 11 My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke,**
- 12 because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.**
- 13 Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding,**
- 14 for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.**

1. Ex. 29:33 (KJV)
2. Lev. 10:1
3. See Ps. 37:3,9,11,22,27,29,34.
4. Matt. 5:5
5. See Ps. 1:1-4.

15 She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
16 Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.
17 Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.
18 She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.
19 By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place;
20 by his knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew.
21 My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight;
22 they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck.
23 Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble;
24 when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
25 Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked,
26 for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared.

In his commentary *Proverbs*, Derek Kidner remarks: "Whereas chapter 2 emphasized the moral stability which grows with wisdom, chapter 3 particularly promises serenity. This is seen as the fruit of a thoroughgoing godliness, three aspects of which mark the main division of the chapter." These three aspects are given as "Glad commitment" (vv. 1-10), "Patient quest" (vv. 11-20), and "Quiet integrity" (vv. 21-35). All three sections are marked by the words "My son."

The key concept, stated at the opening of this chapter, is obedience of the heart. The tension that runs through the whole Old Testament is the conflict between the law of God and the condition of the human heart. Paul stresses in Romans that the law was unable to help us because of our sinful nature. It is only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross that God's commands can become part of our inner being. Paul writes: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."¹ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "Forgetfulness of God's law is the fault of the heart, not merely of the head. When the heart keeps God's precepts as a precious treasure, the memory does not easily forget them." And *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "Forgetting here is not so much oblivion arising from defective memory, as a willful disregard and neglect of the admonitions of the teacher." The Hebrew word, rendered "your heart" is *libekha*, which, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*, occurs twenty-five times in *The Book of Proverbs*.

The blessings of obedience that comes from the heart, that which is based on love for God, is expressed in terms of duration and quality of life. The NIV misses some of this in its rendering: "they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity." *Young's Literal Translation* reads: "For length of days and years, Life and peace they do add to thee." This seems to cover life on earth and throughout eternity in heaven, crowned by "peace," which is the Hebrew word *shalom*. The Apostle Paul affirms this, saying: "godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."² There seems to be a suggestion in this chapter that loving obedience is good for one's physical health. The fact that this cannot be proven statically does not affect the principle. The psalmist confirms the relationship between love for God, inner peace, and righteous living. "Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble."³ *Geneva Notes* connects mercy and truth to the Ten Commandments and states: "By mercy and truth he means the commandments of the first and second table, or else the mercy and faithfulness that we ought to use toward our neighbors." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds: "'Mercy' toward men; 'truth,' i.e., sincerity, toward God. These two comprehend all the duties we owe toward God and man."

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1. Rom. 8:3,4
 2. I Tim. 4:8
 3. Ps. 119:165

The fatherly advice in v. 3 is couched in exquisite language: “Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.” Love and faithfulness are to be worn through life as jewelry. In our modern world wearing of jewelry is more a “girl-thing” than a male fashion, although some boys and men also have begun to wear earrings and chains again. Whether wearing jewelry serves to enhance beauty or serves to cover up the lack of it is a topic that does not fit into our present discussion. The Apostle Peter emphasizes the need for inner beauty as he addresses the wives of unbelieving husbands: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.”¹ *The Book of Proverbs* states that the same principle applies to both sexes.

Moses first used this kind of language to impress upon the people of Israel the need to obey God’s commands: “This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand.”² “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.”³ The Jews took this command literally and began to wear their phylacteries.

The danger of using, even spiritual ornaments, to cover up a lack of obedience is emphasized in the advice to write love and faithfulness on the tablet of our heart. The young man who wrote Psalm 119 understood the implication of this when he said: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”⁴ Our problem, as we saw above, is that our sinful nature does not accept the writing of God’s law on our heart if we try to do our own writing. Only if the Holy Spirit makes the inscriptions will there be a change of attitude that makes obedience a natural tendency. That is why God promises to do the writing Himself. As we read in Jeremiah: “ ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ ”⁵

The Hebrew words for “love” and “faithfulness” are *chesed* and *emeth*, also rendered “mercy,” and “truth.” These are the two fundamental elements in God’s relationship with us. The word *chesed* is mostly used of God’s love in the context of the covenant He made with us. “Love” and “faithfulness” are like the marriage vows of His relationship with us. In our fellowship with God we will mirror them as part of our testimony. As followers of Jesus Christ we are to be loving and reliable. The result of the implant of God’s grace and truth in our heart will become for us a good reputation before God and men. Paul expresses this with the word “aroma.” “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.” And he adds the question: “And who is equal to such a task?”⁶ The only human being for whom wisdom and a good reputation came naturally was our Lord Jesus Christ. Luke states about Him: “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”⁷

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1. I Peter 3:3-5
 2. Ex. 13:9
 3. Deut. 6:6-8
 4. Ps. 119:11
 5. Jer. 31:33
 6. II Cor. 2:15,16
 7. Luke 2:52

The Hebrew words rendered “favor” and “a good name” are *chen* and *sekel*, meaning “grace” and “intelligence.” Our reputation rests on our character and our character is formed by our relationship with God.

The Hebrew word for “trust” in v. 5 is *batach*, which has the meaning of a sense of security or “to hide for refuge.” The English word “entrust yourself to” conveys the meaning better. Our faith in God is based on the assumption that He is absolutely reliable. The Israelites struggled with this when they left Egypt and entered the desert. They believed that God had taken them to the desert to die.¹ Trust in God means that we do not allow ourselves to think that God would, at any time or in any way, be governed by devious ulterior motives in His dealings with us. It means understanding that, in spite of what our circumstances may look like, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”²

This means that we take our own understanding of circumstances and situations to be an unreliable tool of measurement and that we never take our perception as a basis for action. Trusting in the LORD with all our heart opens the door to divine guidance in our life.

V. 6 – “in all your ways acknowledge him,” reads literally “know Him in all your ways.” The Hebrew word *yada* has a wide variety of meaning. It refers, among others, to intimate knowledge as in the verse “Adam *lay* with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.” The KJV reads: “And Adam *knew* Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain.” The idea is that we keep no secrets from God but we tell Him everything because of our love relationship with Him.

This also suggests that God does not dictate His thoughts and plans to us. He allows us to take the initiative in planning the route. We are invited to consult Him so that we will be kept from engaging upon paths that would lead to a dead end. “In all your ways acknowledge him” covers the whole of human life and not just the moments of crisis in which the great and important decisions must be made. Involving God in the details, the nitty-gritty of our daily existence will make throwing ourselves upon Him in moments of great importance a natural reflex.

V. 7 carries on the same thought, approaching it from a different angle. In the previous verses God was recognized as the source of wisdom and guidance. In this verse a warning is issued against considering wisdom apart from God. Our deceptive hearts have the ability to cleverly manipulate us into believing that our wise choices find their roots in our own intelligence and character. We can trust God and become proud of the fact that we do so. Jesus condemned the Pharisees and Rabbis of His time, not for praying to God but to use their prayers for the wrong reasons. He said to His disciples: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.”³ And “Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’”⁴ When we look at the wisdom God has given us and we entertain the thought that we would have come up with the same conclusions on our own, forgetting that God helped us, we become “wise in your own eyes.” That will qualify us as fool. The core of true humility is not denial of talents but the ability to recognize the source. The Apostle Paul issues several warnings along this line: “Do not be conceited.”⁵ And: “We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.”⁶ “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”⁷

1. See Ex. 14:11,12; 16:3; Num. 14:16; 20:4; 21:5.

2. Rom. 8:28

3. Matt. 6:5

4. Matt. 23:5-7

5. Rom. 12:16

The fear of God, again, is the healthy respect and awe we experience when we realize who God is: the Almighty, the Most High. Understanding who God is will result in a recognition of the enemy, who may come to us in the disguise of an angel. The Apostle Paul warns that “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.”¹ Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases: “Run to God! Run from evil!”

Interestingly, the Hebrew word rendered “body” is *shor*, meaning literally “the umbilical cord.” The KJV renders it “navel.” The word appears only at one other place in the Old Testament in the verse: “On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths.”² No image better conveys our complete dependence upon God than that of a fetus in its mother’s womb. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “We need not puzzle ourselves to find out what we may suppose to be a more delicate meaning for the original word *shor* than navel; for I am satisfied a more proper cannot be found. It is well known that it is by the umbilical cord that the fetus receives its nourishment all the time it is in the womb of the mother. It receives nothing by the mouth, nor by any other means: by this alone all nourishment is received, and the circulation of the blood kept up. When, therefore, the wise man says, that ‘trusting in the Lord with the whole heart, and acknowledging him in all a man’s ways, etc., shall be health to the navel, and marrow to the bones;’ he in effect says, that this is as essential to the life of God in the soul of man, and to the continual growth in grace, as the umbilical cord is to the life and growth of the fetus in the womb. Without the latter, no human being could ever exist or be born; without the former, no true religion can ever be found. Trust or faith in God is as necessary to derive grace from him to nourish the soul, and cause it to grow up unto eternal life, as the navel string or umbilical cord is to the human being in the first stage of its existence.”

The Hebrew word rendered “nourishment” in “and nourishment to your bones” (v. 8) is *shiqquwy*, which literally means “moisture.” The KJV translates it “marrow.” Bones are, of course, part of the unborn child but they do not begin to play an important role in the life of the infant until its birth. No human life can be imagined without the frame that upholds the body and the nervous system that is contained in the bone marrow. The second part of v. 8, therefore, speaks of birth, growth, and vitality.

The recommendation “Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops” is not necessarily a reference to tithing. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The Israelites ‘honored Jehovah with their substance’ when they contributed towards the erection of the tabernacle in the wilderness, and later when they assisted in the preparations for the building of the temple, and in the payment of tithes. The injunction may undoubtedly refer to tithes, and is in accordance with the requirement of the Mosaic Law on that and other points as to oblations, free will offerings, etc.; but it has a wider bearing and contemplates the use of wealth for all pious and charitable purposes (see ... Proverbs 14:31). The word *maaser*, ‘tithe,’ does not occur in the Proverbs.” And *Barnes’ Notes* adds: “ ‘Substance’ points to capital, ‘increase’ to revenue. The Septuagint as if to guard against ill-gotten gains being offered as an atonement for the ill-getting, inserts the qualifying words, ‘honor the Lord from thy righteous labors.’ ” Although the Law of Moses demanded tithing, the concept existed before the law was given, as is evident from Jacob’s vow: “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s house, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”³

By giving back to the Lord a portion of the blessing He gives to us we recognize that our increase of possessions is not the result of our own skill or energy. As the Psalmist expresses: “Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand

6. I Cor. 8:1-3
7. Gal. 6:3
1. II Cor. 11:14
2. Ezek. 16:4
3. Gen. 28:20-22

guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat — for he grants sleep to those he loves.”¹

Derek Kidner, in *The Proverbs*, remarks profoundly: “We tend to seize on verse 10, either critically or hopefully. But it must not steal the thunder of verse 9. To ‘know’ God in our financial ‘ways’ is to see that these *honor* Him; the honor will be compounded largely of homage (in giving Him the first and not a later share, 9; *cf.* I Cor. 16:2; Mk. 12:44), of gratitude (see Dt. 26:9-11) and of trust (*cf.* verse 5), for such giving in the face of material pressure is a simple test of faith. But a basic ingredient is fair business dealings; and this is saved up for fuller treatment in the final paragraph (27-35). The generalization that piety brings plenty chimes in with much of Scripture (*e.g.* Dt. 28:1-14; Mal. 3:10) and of experience. If it were *more* than a generalization (as Job’s comforters held), God would be not so much honored, as invested in, by our gifts. Verses 11,12 are therefore well placed to balance 8 and 10 (and to lead into 13ff.) with the reminder of other divine methods and better prizes than prosperity.”

Vv. 10 and 11 seem to contradict more than “balance” the previous ones, as Kidner suggests. The overflowing barns and brimming wine vats speak of success, whilst being disciplined suggests adversity and loss of possessions. Although the Old Testament often expresses blessing in terms of material prosperity, the suggestion here seems to be that material wealth is only symbolic for something greater. As the wearing of jewelry can enhance inner beauty, as we saw above, so spiritual blessing can be expressed materially, but the two are not identical. God’s desire is to bless us, not merely in our barns and vats but in our spirit and soul. And if material success or physical health stand in the way of holiness, God will not hesitate to remove either or both in order to achieve our ultimate good. In quoting these verses, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts his finger on the issue by stating: “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”² If health and wealth are not balanced by holiness they will become a curse instead of a blessing. We experience God’s love often more in our adversities than in our times of ease. Jesus says: “Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”³

V. 10 is a quotation from the Book of Job: “Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.”⁴ They are part of a speech of Eliphaz the Temanite to Job. The fact that Eliphaz was found wanting, as his other friends were, in his effort to comfort Job does not diminish the truth of his words.

The Hebrew word for “discipline” is *muwcar*, which is derived from the word *yacar*, meaning to instruct by spanking. The modern philosophy of pedagogy has succeeded in outlawing spanking in home and school but that does not change the fact that we learn more from our pain than from our pleasure.

The Wisdom of Proverbs states that we have the choice as to how we want to react to God’s discipline: we can despise and resent it, or we can accept and endure it. It is not for nothing that the Apostle Paul compares the spiritual life of a Christian to an achievement in sports. “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”⁵ We may compare God to a coach or trainer in our spiritual course through life. If the vision of achieving the goal of God’s holiness stands clearly before our eyes we will welcome any

1. Ps. 127:1,2
2. Heb. 12:10
3. John 15:2
4. Job 5:17
5. I Cor. 9:24-27

pain that will help us to keep going. God shows His eternal love for us in making us feel the pain of our training. It will help us to remember that none of our pain will ever equal the pain Jesus felt on His way to reach the Father's goal.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "The idea of the passage is evidently taken from ... Deuteronomy 8:5, 'Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee.' The idea of the paternal relationship of God to mankind is found elsewhere (... Jeremiah 31:9; ... Malachi 2:10), and especially finds expression in the Lord's prayer. When the truth of this passage is learned, we shall be drawn to, rather than repelled from, God by his corrections. The gracious end of earthly trials is expressed in ... Hebrews 12:6, 2; cf. ... Romans 5:3-5; ... 2 Corinthians 4:17 ... 'These gracious words (Hebrews 12.) are written in Holy Scripture for our comfort and instruction; that we should patiently and with thanksgiving bear our heavenly Father's correction, whensoever by any manner of adversity it shall please his gracious goodness to visit us.' "

Some Bible scholars connect the blessedness in vv. 13 and following to the preceding verses about discipline. Whether this is correct or not can be disputed. The Hebrew word '*esher*, "happiness" is usually used as an interjection, "how happy!" Our natural reaction to pain is usually not an exclamation of happiness. But if the pain is as the labor pains in childbirth, the birth of the baby compensates for more than can be expressed. If the discovery of wisdom is the result of our suffering we will consider the price paid well worth.

The author of Proverbs leads us back to Paradise to the tree of life. This means a reversal of history. Our parents' choice of the wrong tree evicted them from Paradise and condemned Eve to suffer pain in the birth of her children. Here the pain paves the way back to the tree Adam and Eve ought to have chosen. It is difficult for us to understand the pristine condition of the first human pair. Their communion with God seems to have been unimpaired. But if that were so, Satan would not have had such easy access into their minds and created doubt about God's Word. We understand from God's decision to banish them from Paradise that eating from the tree of life would have given them eternal life, even after their fall. We read: "And the LORD God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.' So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken."¹ Acquisition of wisdom, which for us means entering into a vital relationship with Jesus Christ who is God's wisdom for us,² suggests that we are led back to the point where history took its first wrong turn for the human race.

The image of the "tree of life" is a favorite in *The Book of Proverbs*. We find it five times in this book: "She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed."³ "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise."⁴ "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life."⁵ And "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit."⁶ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: Wisdom - i.e., the saving knowledge of God in Christ, or Christ Himself-restores us to the life eternal which we lost in Adam. The fruit of other trees appeases hunger for a time: this tree forever. It saves not merely from death, but from disease (Rev 22:2,14; 2:7; Ezek 47:12)." *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Old ecclesiastical writers saw in the expression a reference to Christ's redeeming work. 'The tree of life is the cross of Christ.' "

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1. Gen. 3:22,23
 2. See I Cor. 1:30.
 3. Prov. 3:18
 4. Prov. 11:30
 5. Prov. 13:12
 6. Prov. 15:4

Wisdom is incomparable! What we know to be gold is only a vague shadow of the real gold that paves the streets of the New Jerusalem. So is Wisdom infinitely superior to anything we consider worth possessing in this world. Without it nothing has meaning.

The benefits of wisdom are displayed in terms that sound almost utopian: long life, riches, honor, pleasure and peace. One look around ought to make us realize that reality does not correspond to these terms. We may think that the author of Proverbs is either blindfolded or he speaks about another planet. The same Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure,” and “I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all,” and “Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man.”¹ Evidently, the gain of wisdom, although it can be compared to the good things on earth, is not always manifested in that which seems good; sometimes it comes in disguises that seem to contradict its own character. Speaking about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”² Real wisdom may not always show up in public opinion polls and some of the wisest people may appear to be fools in the public eye.

Wisdom is incomparable as a possession, although the author compares it frequently to rubies. V. 15 – “She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.” The Hebrew word is *paniyn*, according to some Bible scholars, may mean “pearl.” We find the comparison between wisdom and this precious stone four times in *The Book of Proverbs*.³ These passages may have been the basis for Jesus’ parable about the pearl and the Kingdom of Heaven: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”⁴ Jesus’ parable not only equates the acquisition of wisdom with entering into God’s kingdom, but it also states the price to be paid as “everything he had.” Only a correct evaluation of our own possessions and values and an accurate assessment of the exchange will bring us to the place where we are willing to give our life in order to acquire wisdom. Jim Elliot showed that he had this wisdom when he wrote in his diary: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to obtain what he cannot lose.”

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, The Hebrew grammar uses two different tenses in “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom.” “Blessed” is a plural, indicating supreme blessedness and “Blessed is” is in the perfect tense, meaning permanent possession. But “finds,” or “has found” is in the imperfect tense, denoting a continually renewed and repeated attaining.”

Vv. 19 and 20 place the wisdom we are invited to acquire within the framework of God’s creation of the universe. The fact that our planet is presented as the center of the universe does not change the principle of the argument. Actually, since we do not know anything about the outer limits of space, the point of what is at the center cannot even be argued. The author of Proverbs is a proponent of what is nowadays called “Intelligent Design.” Those who suggest that the universe in which we live is the ultimate product of

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1. Eccl. 7:4; 9:11, 15
 2. I Cor. 1:20,21, 25,27-30
 3. The other references are Prov. 8:11; 20:15 and 31:10.
 4. Matt. 13:45-46

chance, that we are not the result of an intelligent plan, have no basis upon which to rest their own intelligence. And if the tools used to prove a point cannot be verified, why would one believe that the things verified are correct? People who find no point of reference outside themselves for their own logic should consider themselves disqualified to participate in the debate. We will leave this philosophical digression here and return to the text.

The basic tenet of these two verses is that it requires wisdom to recognize wisdom. Even a superficial study of creation makes one marvel at the wonder and glory of all that exists. From the workings of the atoms to the miracle of sight and sound, the glory of sunrises and sunsets to the sight of the Milky Way, the glacier-covered mountains and the spring flowers in the meadows, the flight of an eagle and the song of a bird, from beginning to end we are surrounded by a beauty that overwhelms and humbles us. “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”¹ It takes a human brain to marvel, enjoy, and understand, a brain that cannot be the ultimate fruit of a haphazard collision.

The whole process of creation as we find it detailed in the first chapter of Genesis, is outlined in these verses in two or three bold strokes of the brush. God determined the relationship between our planet and all the other heavenly bodies in our solar system, as well as the relationship between all solar systems that are in existence. We discover daily more about the marvelous preciseness with which the whole system functions. The more we know, the more we marvel and the less we understand.

As far as our planet is concerned, the author only mentions the water below and above. Scientists have established a link between the presence of water and the existence of life. In the human exploration of the planet Mars, for instance, the search was for indications that water had ever existed there. In searching for wisdom, we are seeking for what is the basis for our very existence. We owe our life to the fact that God possesses wisdom. We owe it to our own life to possess it ourselves.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on vv. 21-26 saying: “It becomes very clear that wisdom means walking with God (23,26); and the paradox of this familiar metaphor is brought out by the way in which the shrewdness commended in verse 21 ... rubs shoulders with the cosmic wisdom of 19,20. The promised serenity of such a life as meets us here comes, at one level, from sheer good management on God’s sound principles (22,23 are the consequence of 21), and at a deeper level, from the Lord’s personal care (26).

“Sound wisdom” is the translation of the Hebrew word *tuwshiyah*, which is rendered “victory” in the verse: “He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless.”² “Discernment” is *mezimmah* in Hebrew. We encountered the word early on in this book and commented on it that it often has a derogatory meaning. Yet, it is the shrewdness our Lord commended in the dishonest manager and which He set as an example for us to follow. “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”³

“They will be life for you” must be understood not as being the essence of life, but as the tools to be used to live life to the uttermost. The Hebrew reads literally: “And they are life to thy soul, and grace to thy neck.” We find the same thought expressed in Chapter 1:9 – “They will be a garland to *grace* your head and a chain to adorn your neck.”

Life in these verses is represented as a journey, a path to be traveled. We need skill and savvy to avoid the obstacles hidden under the surface. Since we all go through life, traveling where we have never been before, we cannot possibly know what is ahead of us. It is not our knowledge of the future that provides a safeguard but the knowledge of Him who holds the future that can protect us from shipwrecks. It is knowing “Him who is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without

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1. Ps. 8:1
 2. Prov. 2:7
 3. Matt. 10:16

fault and with great joy”¹ that provides us with the life insurance we need. V. 24 gives expression to the right kind of relaxation, “lying down without fear and dreaming sweet dreams while asleep.” Eugene H. Peterson renders this amusingly in *Proverbs*: “You’ll take afternoon naps without a worry; you’ll enjoy a good night’s sleep.”

The promised absence of fear does not mean that no unexpected and unpleasant experiences will befall us. Wisdom makes us understand that nothing will happen to us that is not part of God’s specific plan for our life, however horrible the experience may be. It is the understanding that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”² that is the antidote for fear. When we understand that our painful events are part of God’s intent that we “be conformed to the likeness of his Son,”³ that makes the difference.

E. Be Kind to Others 3:27-35

27 Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.

28 Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow" — when you now have it with you.

29 Do not plot harm against your neighbor, who lives trustfully near you.

30 Do not accuse a man for no reason — when he has done you no harm.

31 Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways,

32 for the LORD detests a perverse man but takes the upright into his confidence.

33 The LORD’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous.

34 He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble.

35 The wise inherit honor, but fools he holds up to shame.

The topic in these verses is neighborly love, expressed in terms of practical assistance. If this is put in a form of legal obligation it is because the law states: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”⁴ The last nine verses of this chapter expound that wisdom consists in serving your neighbor in love, in abstaining from hatred and jealousy, and in exercising righteousness in humility.

The words “those who deserve it” in v. 27 are intriguing and difficult to explain. The Hebrew word is *ba`al*, which can be rendered variously as “master,” “husband,” or “owner.” The idea is obviously that the receiver has a right to the goods. *The Living Bible’s* paraphrase “Don’t withhold repayment of your debts,” probably, comes closer to the intent of the writer. But the added words “when it is in your power to act” suggest that more is involved than a legal obligation to repay debts.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: “He who is in need has a claim of ownership upon our property by the law of love, which is the law of God. The goods which we can and ought to bestow are not ours, but the property of the poor . . . Need makes the poor the owner.” This thought is carried through in the New Testament where Jesus, speaking about giving alms, calls them “acts of righteousness.”⁵ The fact that we are not owners of our wealth but stewards determines that we must be generous in our dealing with those whose needs exceed ours. We all need mercy on the Day of Judgment and having exercised it in life may be a great help when we are in need of more than financial assistance. In

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1. See Jude 24.
 2. Rom. 8:28
 3. Rom. 8:29
 4. Lev. 19:18
 5. Matt. 6:1

the words of James: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!”¹ *The Septuagint* renders the verse: “Abstain not from doing good to the needy.” *The Vulgate* puts a different twist to it with: “Do not prohibit him who can from doing good; if you are able, do good also yourself.”

The addition in v. 28 – “Come back later; I’ll give it tomorrow” suggests more than a tendency to procrastination. It is a statement that says: “my time” is more important than “your time.” It says: “I am your benefactor and I want you to express the proper gratitude.” This attitude is the opposite of Jesus’ advice: “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”²

Vv. 29,30 depict the basis of a neighborly relationship. When a Doctor of Law asked Jesus the question “Who is my neighbor?” and Jesus answered with *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*, the story concludes with Jesus’ question: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”³ The man had asked: “Who is my neighbor?” and Jesus answered him with the question: “Whose neighbor are you?” We ought to ask ourselves the question: “Am I someone’s neighbor?” Do we generate enough confidence in people among whom we live so that they will open up to us and accept our help?

Vv. 31, 32 deal with corruption of power. Before Adam and Eve fell into sin, no human being exercised authority over another. Adam was lord of creation, not of his wife. It was only after the first human couple sinned that God said to Eve: “He will rule over you.”⁴ Human authority and government are accommodations to our sinful condition. Lord Acton was almost one hundred percent correct with his statement: “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” When we see misuse of power, our reaction is often that we wish we had the power to do something about it.

God’s antidote to corruption of power is service. We read in Luke’s Gospel what happened during the celebration of the Last Supper: “Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.’”⁵ And John’s Gospel describes what is probably the same scene: “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me “Teacher” and “Lord,” and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.’”⁶

1. James 2:12,13

2. Matt. 6:3,4

3. See Luke 10:29-36.

4. Gen. 3:16

5. Luke 22:24-28

6. John 13:3-5, 12-17

V. 32 speaks about a perverse person. The Hebrew word *luwz* literally means: “to turn aside.” It depicts a departure from that which comes naturally. In Leviticus it is used of homosexuality.¹ God’s reaction to that is the same as to idolatry. He is *tow`ebah*, “disgusted.” On the other hand, God shares His secrets with those who live upright lives. The Hebrew word *cowd* means “intimacy.” We find it in the verse “The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.”² Life is not only about being good, but being God’s confidant. It is not merely a matter of God speaking to us and our hearing His voice, it means intimacy deeper than can be experienced in inter-human relations. It is obvious that God will not share His secrets with us if we do not share ours with Him.

Our personal relationship with the Lord will have an impact upon our family. V. 33 states: “The LORD’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous.” We are all channels, either for curses or blessings.

If in these last five verses violence, perversity, wickedness and mockery are linked together, so are uprightness, intimacy, humility and wisdom. Actually, wisdom is defined as being upright, intimate with God and humble. If we are wise we will have nothing to be ashamed about on the Day of Judgment.

F. Security in Wisdom 4:1-13

- 1 Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.***
2 I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching.
3 When I was a boy in my father’s house, still tender, and an only child of my mother,
4 he taught me and said, "Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live.
- 5 Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them.***
6 Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you.
7 Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.
8 Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you.
9 She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor."
10 Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many.
11 I guide you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths.
12 When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble.
13 Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life.

Although we understand that a personal relationship with God cannot be inherited from previous generations, it can be modeled and made attractive by a father before his sons, awakening in them the desire to emulate the example. Solomon had seen in his father David an intimacy with God that had made him jealous. David had demonstrated what he had expressed in one of his psalms: “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”³ Although Solomon cannot have overlooked his father’s shortcomings, he had learned one of the most important lessons that a father can teach his child, and he wanted to pass that on to his own son. The later failures of Solomon’s own life and of his sons’ does not diminish the truth and value of what is said in these verses.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on the opening verses: “This linking of three generations (verses 1, 3ff.) demonstrates how a love of the best things will be transmitted mainly by personal influence,

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1. See Lev. 18:22.
 2. Ps. 25:14
 3. Ps. 27:4

along the channels of affection. The approach is positive: the teacher is far less interested in ‘don’ts’ (though they have their place: see 3:27-31) than in getting his pupil to see that he is offered the secret of being really alive (4b), and therefore to co-operate by cultivating his own love (6) of the wisdom which is that secret.”

The Pulpit Commentary, looking at these verses and beyond, states: “The chief topics touched upon are

- (1) the supreme importance of Wisdom as being ‘the principal thing’ to be obtained before everything else (vers. 7-9);
- (2) the two ways that lie open to the choice of youth, distinguished respectively as the way of light and the way of darkness (vers. 14-19); and
- (3) the guarding of the heart with all diligence, as being the seat of conscience and the fountain of life in its moral sense (vers. 23-27). The first part of the discourse is characterized by exhortations accompanied by promises; the latter part takes the form of warning, and warning of an alarming nature. The harmony which exists between the allusions in the discourse and the facts recorded in the historical books of Samuel and Chronicles serves to indicate that we have before us, in substance at least, the advice which David gave to Solomon, and that the discourse is Solomonic.”

V. 7 is rendered differently in various translations. The NIV reads, “Wisdom is supreme;” The KJV “Wisdom is the principal thing;” TLB “Getting wisdom is the most important thing you can do!” And Darby “The beginning of wisdom [is], Get wisdom.” The Hebrew word *reshiyth* is the first word found in the Bible: “*In the beginning* God created the heavens and the earth.”¹ It means “the first, in place, time, order or rank.” We find it in the verse “Bring the best of the *firstfruits* of your soil to the house of the LORD your God.”² Darby’s interpretation may be the closest to what is intended in the text. Bible scholars have argued about the seemingly self-defeating premise of the thought that wisdom is needed to obtain wisdom. Yet, it seems self-evident that without the desire for wisdom the foundation of wisdom is lacking. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes Seneca’s aphorism: “A large part of good is the wish to become good.” Jesus appears to confirm this truth in *the Parable of the Talents*, in which the servant who made the most profit was given the share of him who had hidden his talent. Jesus commented: “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”³ The main difference between the wise and the foolish is in the understanding of their needs. Those who believe they do not have a problem are the ones who have the greatest problem. Unless we realize what our greatest need is, we are not willing to pay the cost. The example of the merchant of pearls in Jesus’ parable shows us that it takes expertise to recognize value. The merchant sold everything he had because he knew the value of the perfect pearl.⁴ In giving “our utmost for His highest” we emulate God who gave Himself in Jesus Christ for our salvation. In our search for the pearl, we become the pearl!

Although two different sets of words are used in the parallels of v. 8 (Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you), the meaning of the verbs is the same. The idea in “esteem” is “to build up,” and the same is expressed in the word “exalt.” In “embrace her, and she will honor you” the order is reversed in the Hebrew: “she will honor you [if you] embrace her.” The Hebrew verb for “honor” is *kabad*, which literally means “to be heavy.” The word is used in a wide variety of meanings, but the obvious idea in this context is “substance.” We use it in the expression: “His words carry a lot of weight.” The Apostle Paul uses it in the verse: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far

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1. Gen. 1:1
 2. Ex. 23:19
 3. Matt. 25:29
 4. See Matt. 13:45,46.

more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”¹ God’s wisdom will give meaning and substance to our life on earth and it will provide us with the essence of the glory to come.

The main idea in vv. 10-13 is guidance. Although the dangers and obstacles of the path upon which we travel are not spelled out, it is obvious that they are there, otherwise the warning would be redundant. “The years of your life will be many” stands for the quality of a life lived to the full, rather than for the duration of it. If death were the end of life, the finality of all, it would not make much difference how long one lives on earth. The length of a life of wisdom reaches beyond life on earth into eternity.

G. Avoid the Wicked 4:14-22

14 Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men.

15 Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way.

16 For they cannot sleep till they do evil; they are robbed of slumber till they make someone fall.

17 They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

18 The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

19 But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.

20 My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words.

21 Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart;

22 for they are life to those who find them and health to a man’s whole body.

The idea of this section is obviously to evoke the desire for wisdom in the heart of the hearer by showing the difference between wisdom and evil, light and darkness. The young man who is addressed here stands at the dawn of life; he either walks toward the rising sun or he retreats into the darkness of night.

The father traces two paths before his son’s eyes, and although it is up to the boy to make his own choice, he is warned not to take the evil one. Jesus elaborates on the same picture in The Sermon on The Mount where we read: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”² The NIV uses three expressions of warning: “Do not set foot,” “(do not) walk” and “avoid.” The Hebrew reads literally: “Enter not,” “go not,” “avoid.” In a way, the pattern God presented to Adam and Eve in the form of a choice between the fruit of two trees is repeated here. God said to our first parents: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”³ The choice is ultimately a choice of obedience to the Word of God. God warned Adam and Eve against the wrong choice by saying: “you will surely die,” indicating the effect it would have upon them.

The father shows how the wrong choice affects society. The wickedness of the wicked makes them rob and destroy their neighbor. Choosing against God means choosing against humanity. These people feed themselves with “the bread of wickedness” and “the wine of violence.” We all become what we eat!

V. 18 is one of the most beautiful verses in the whole Book of Proverbs: “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.” It breathes the freshness of the morning and entralls us with the beauty of the rising sun. Few things on our planet are more beautiful and majestic than sunsets and sunrises. We feel as if the Creator splashes His glorious paints on the sky for our benefit. We belong to this color. The artist is the One who made us. The Hebrew is even more expressive:

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1. II Cor. 4:17 (KJV)
 2. Matt. 7:13,14
 3. Gen. 2:16,17

“And the path of the righteous [is] as a shining light, going and brightening till the day is established.” How can we see this explosion of light and choose darkness!

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary comments here: “This seems plainly to refer to the progress of the rising sun while below the horizon; and the gradual increase of the light occasioned by the reflection of his rays by means of the atmosphere, till at last he is completely elevated above the horizon, and then the prepared day has fully taken place, the sun having risen at the determined time. So, the truly wise man is but in his twilight here below; but he is in a state of glorious preparation for the realms of everlasting light; till at last, emerging from darkness and the shadows of death, he is ushered into the full blaze of endless felicity. Yet previously to his enjoyment of this glory, which is prepared for him, he is going-walking in the commandments of his God blameless; and illuminating-reflecting the light of the salvation which he has received on all those who form the circle of his acquaintance.”

The Hebrew uses two words for “shining” and “shine.” The first, *nogahh*, is almost exclusively used in the Old Testament of the glory of God. We find it in David’s description of God’s glory: “Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced, with hailstones and bolts of lightning.”¹ The second word is *’owr* which means “to be luminous.” The first occurrence of the word is found in the creation of the sun and moon: “And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth.’ And it was so.”² It seems that the two verbs refer to the supernatural and the natural attributes of light. Transferred to the metaphorical use in our text we find the application that we will shine in this world if we allow God’s light to shine upon us. Jesus affirms this in *The Sermon on the Mount*: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”³ We learn from the following verse that depicts the opposite condition, the darkness that makes the wicked stumble, that walking in God’s light will keep us from falling. Again, we find confirmation in Jesus’ words to His disciples who were afraid for their lives if they would go to Jerusalem: “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world’s light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.”⁴

If the last three verses of this section (20-22) seem repetitive it is because they are. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “The constant repetition of such a call (introducing nearly every paragraph of this section of the book) is deliberate, for a major part of godliness lies in dogged attentiveness to familiar truths. So a kind of medical inspection follows, in which one’s state of readiness in the various realms symbolized by heart, mouth, eyes and feet, comes under review.” The word the father passes on to his son is the Word of God of which Moses said: “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”⁵

The place to keep the Word of God is the heart. The Hebrew word is *lebab*, which stands for man’s innermost being, the center of his existence. It is not merely, as in the modern use of the word, the seat of emotions; it involves the whole of the human being: intellect, will, and emotion. The translation “keep them within your heart” does not render the depth of the Hebrew, which reads literally: “Keep them in the midst of your heart.” The penetration of the Word of God is the deepest experience the human soul can have. The

1. Ps. 18:12
2. Gen. 1:14,15
3. Matt. 5:14-16
4. John 11:9,10
5. Deut. 8:3

author of Hebrews does justice to the concept by saying: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”¹ The effect of the presence of God’s Word in the inner recesses of our being is described as life and health to the whole body. We know that not everyone who hides God’s Word in the heart enjoys perfect physical health, although some people believe it ought to. There are no easy answers to the problem of pain. But it is obvious that the presence of the Holy Spirit within us will be experienced as healing, always in the spiritual realm and often also emotional and physical.

H. Keep Your Heart 4:23-27

23 Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

24 Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.

25 Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you.

26 Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm.

27 Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

When hiding the word of God in the inner recesses of our heart, the author of Proverbs advises to put a guard in front of the heart for protection. There is in these words a suggestion of danger. There would not be any need for guards if the truth of God were self-protecting. If the Spirit of God concentrates His attention upon our heart, so does the devil. The unregenerate heart is not “the wellspring of life,” as v. 23 states it ought to be. In Jesus’ words: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”² It is only as we allow the Word of God to do its healing work inside us that we become what God wants us to be: a source of blessing and life. Jesus may have had this text in mind, when he said: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, *as the Scripture has said*, streams of living water will flow from within him.”³

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases v. 24 – “Don’t talk out of both sides of your mouth; avoid careless banter, white lies, and gossip.” Even if the Word of God occupies the central place in our life, our immoral habits will not change without our consent. We still have the power to stop the streams of living water from flowing out. The Holy Spirit will convict us, but He will not force us. The Spirit will help us to clean up our speech, but we have to ask Him to do so. That is the reason the Apostle Paul writes to Christians: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”⁴ We may not be able to clean up our act overnight, but without our consent and cooperation it will not get done. Without a recognition and confession of our heart’s condition, we will not be able to get rid of our own corruption. Sanctification is not a matter of willpower or strong character. We cannot pull ourselves out of the ditch by our own bootstraps. We have to confess to God that we are in a ditch and need to be pulled out. That first confession must be followed by a series of surrenders if we want to become the source of love and wisdom that the Spirit wants to make us.

1. Heb. 4:12

2. Matt. 15:19

3. John 7:37,38

4. Eph. 4:25,29-32

As was mentioned above, there is a logical sequence in the mention of the heart, the mouth, the eyes and the feet. If a change of heart is not demonstrated in a renewal of the tongue, which is inside the mouth, in the eye and the feet, it is doubtful that any inner regeneration has taken place. The warning James issues against the sins of the tongue demonstrates that proof of renewal begins with the tongue. We read: “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.”¹

There is also an obvious connection between the way our eyes travel and the placing of our feet. The author of Proverbs advises to keep our eyes on the goal towards which we are traveling. The Hebrew has the, to us strange construction, “Let your eyes look right on and let your eyelids look straight before you.” We interpret this to mean that our concentration is so intense that we do not blink in the process. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “What the command inculcates is simplicity of aim or principle, singleness of motive. The moral gaze is to be steadily fixed, because if it wanders indolently, lasciviously, aimlessly, it imperils the purity of the soul.” It is a common experience of all who drive a car that the only way to keep straight is to look straight ahead. In walking we may allow ourselves to take in the beauty of our surrounding because our body is better coordinated than the steering wheel of an automobile, but the principle is clear that our feet tend to follow our eyes. We determine how straight we travel by where we look. Job kept himself from thinking impure thoughts by making a covenant with his eyes. We read: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.”² The faster we travel the more important it is to keep looking ahead. The author of Hebrews speaks of a race and of the goal upon which we must fix our eyes: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”³ The same epistle quotes Proverbs 4:26, stating that it promotes healing.⁴ *The Pulpit Commentary* makes the profound observation: “There is the most intimate connection between the heart as the fountain of the moral life and of the conduct of life, which, though determined by the condition of the heart, in its turn reacts upon the heart as the moral center, and keeps it pure. Thus the subject is treated from its two sides.”

Finally, the feet are the vehicle that moves the body. They do not determine the direction but they follow the eye as the eye follows the heart. If our feet bring us where we do not want to go, then the body is sick and our nervous system has gone haywire.

I. Do Not Commit Adultery 5:1-14

- 1 My son, pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight,**
- 2 that you may maintain discretion and your lips may preserve knowledge.**
- 3 For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil;**
- 4 but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.**
- 5 Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.**
- 6 She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.**
- 7 Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say.**
- 8 Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house,**

1. James 3:2
2. Job 31:1
3. Heb. 12:1,2
4. See Heb. 12:13.

**9 lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel,
10 lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house.
11 At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent.
12 You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction!
13 I would not obey my teachers or listen to my instructors.
14 I have come to the brink of utter ruin in the midst of the whole assembly."**

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states about this chapter: "The chapter first uncovers the corruption under the surface-charm of the seductress (1-6), then warns of the price of infidelity (7-14), and finally enlarges on the lasting delight of a faithful marriage, over against its pathetic alternative (15-23)."

In the introduction to this piece of advice the father gives to his son we find again the Hebrew word *mezimmah*, rendered "discretion." The word is found at least eight times in *The Book of Proverbs*, sometimes with a negative connotation as "evil machination," sometimes in a good sense. It corresponds in meaning to Jesus' advice to combine shrewdness with innocence. He said: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."¹ Jesus also illustrated this principle in the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, that concludes with the words: "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light."²

The topic of this section is adultery or fornication. This may be taken as a warning against the sins of the body but it also most certainly applies to the breaking up of a spiritual relationship.

The Hebrew word *zuwr* means "to turn aside." It is sometimes used to denote a foreigner, someone who does not belong to the group. The NIV's translation "an adulterous woman" is only justified by the context. This woman here is the counterpart of Lady Wisdom. We find her in the last book of the Bible as "Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes."³

The main difference between fornication and adultery is in the breaking of a vow. The evil woman in *The Book of Proverbs* is married. Those who sin with her share in her breaking of the promise. We must understand that the thrust of the father's warning is, first of all, an illustration of what it means to become unfaithful in our relationship with God. A young man who deals with the urges of his hormones understands what this kind of temptation is all about.

The first point on which goodness and evil deviate is in the spoken word. The father compares his son's lips with those of the prostitute. In the previous chapter we saw how the healthy body functions in a harmony between the heart, the mouth, the eyes and the feet. Here, the son has, supposedly put away perversity from his mouth and kept corrupt talk far from his lips. The seductress is a sweet and smooth talker but her words leave a bitter taste. The woman's feet do not follow the eyes because eyes do not function in darkness. The words of Paul apply to her: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."⁴ She does not travel toward the dawn of the new day but regresses into eternal night.

It is true that this section speaks about adultery as opposed to marriage, but we maintain that the picture is meant as an illustration. There is a spiritual adultery that is worse than any of the sins of the body. Just as a healthy marriage is an image of our relationship with God, so is a breaking of the vows a picture of the opposite. *The Book of Hosea* shows us clearly that God considers faithlessness in our relationship with Him to be a form of idolatry and adultery. The Apostle Paul writes: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery

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1. Matt. 10:16
 2. See Luke 16:1-8.
 3. See Rev. 17:1-6.
 4. II Cor. 4:4

— but I am talking about Christ and the church.”¹ And to Hosea God said: “Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.”²

The sweet nothings the adulteress whispers are defined as “bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.” The author of Hebrews uses the picture of a double-edged sword to describe the Word of God. “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” In spite of the similarity of words, the end result is quite different. The sword of evil dissects and leaves behind death. The Word of God is a surgical tool that heals and brings life.

Vv. 7-14 continue with the description of temptation in terms of sexual enticement. The body and mind of a young boy will react to this kind of lure. Very few boys will walk away from temptation without any struggle. When Potiphar’s wife tempted Joseph to have sex with her, we may assume that Joseph did not refuse because he was immune to temptation. He refused because of his fellowship with God, which had made him into a trustworthy young man. God rewarded him years later with a royal marriage.³ The word rendered “strangers” in v. 10 is *zuwr*, the same word used above for the adulterous woman. The idea behind “lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man’s house” is that one pays for that which is not real love. Substitutes of love and faithfulness are expensive. We pay for the sins we commit in more than one way.

Giving in to temptation, whether sexual or other, will lead to a life of ruin. The saddest thing that can happen to any human being is to come to the end of one’s life on earth and have nothing but regrets when looking back over it. This does not mean that God cannot save a life even at the last moment, but going to heaven without a crown is not the best we can do. Facing death after having lived life in fellowship is quite different from the death one faces without the comfort of his rod and staff.⁴ The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle said this well: “It is not having to die, but how one has lived that gives death such a bitter taste.”

J. Be Faithful to Your Spouse 5:15-23

15 Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well.

16 Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares?

17 Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers.

18 May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.

19 A loving doe, a graceful deer — may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

20 Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man’s wife?

21 For a man’s ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths.

22 The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast.

23 He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly.

Although the primary meaning of these words pertains to the enjoyment of a sexual relationship within the bonds of marriage, these words also are an illustration of a spiritual reality. The Living Bible captures well the intent of the image, but its paraphrase “Drink from your own well, my son—be faithful and true to your wife. Why should you beget children with women of the street? Why share your children with

1. Eph. 5:31,32

2. Hos. 1:2

3. See Gen. 39:7-20; 41:45.

4. See Ps. 23:4.

those outside your home?” spoils some of the beauty of the poetry. It is not difficult to recognize the author of The Song of Solomon in these verses. The intimacy of the bedroom is compared to a fenced-in home with its own well that supplies water to the one who lives there. Drinking a draft of cool water becomes symbolic for the deepest satisfaction of the human soul. And, since the cup of water represents the fulfillment of sexual intimacy, it elevates the experience to a higher level. The intensity of desire expressed in this image is probably best expressed in David’s cry: “David longed for water and said, ‘Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!’”¹ We find the reality behind the image in the Word of the Lord to Jeremiah: “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”² Jesus spoke in the same vein when He said: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”³

The ultimate truth behind the image is that there is a God-given desire in the human soul that finds satisfaction, by proxy in physical thirst and erotic desire being fulfilled, but that will find its ultimate fulfillment in fellowship with God alone. As Augustine expressed: “Our hearts are restless within us until we find rest in Thee, o God.” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It may be remarked that the allusion to the wife, under the figures employed, enhances her value. It indicates the high estimation in which she is to be held, since the ‘cistern’ or ‘well’ was one of the most valuable possessions and adjuncts of an Eastern house.”

Although this is not specifically stated there is in vv. 15-20 it is a warning against the temptations one may face when growing older. The father speaks to his young son, who may not even be married yet. The mention of “the wife of your youth” makes only sense if the point of view is taken from the perspective of an older age when neither husband or wife are young anymore. That is the time when some men start looking somewhere else for satisfaction. Transferring this thought to fellowship with God makes these verses into a warning against losing freshness and excitement in our spiritual life. Neither in marriage nor in spiritual life may our love grow old. There may be a change in vitality and exuberance but the roots of our love ought to grow deeper as the years of our life advance. The longer we live with God the better do we get to know Him. As John writes in his first epistle: “I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning.”⁴ Knowing God is the most essential thing we can achieve in life. In Jesus’ words: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”⁵

These verses also suggest that women tend to be more faithful in their marriage relations than men. We deduct this from the words “may you ever be captivated by her love.”

Finally, a father can only speak thus to his son if he has modeled fidelity in his own marriage relationship. Our children will know the weight of our advice in the example we have set before them. Unfaithfulness in marriage will affect the next generation and beyond. Ironically, Solomon who spoke these words to his son, who wrote most eloquently about love, was the most foolish lover known in all of Scripture. These words only carry weight because they are the Word of God. This makes us realize the importance of remaining faithful to those things that are a shadow of the spiritual reality. If the bond of marriage ultimately reflects the love of God for us and ours for Him, we better keep the picture clean and sharp for fear of losing what it represents.

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1. I Chron. 11:17
 2. Jer. 2:13
 3. John 7:37,38
 4. I John 2:13
 5. John 17:3

The last three verses of this chapter emphasize the importance of our awareness of God's presence. Knowing that there are no secrets for God will help us not to do anything that cannot stand the light of day. Being open and intimate with God will help to keep our human relations clean. If we keep in mind that God even knows what we think we will be less tempted to entertain thoughts that would embarrass us if they were made known. The key to self-discipline is the understanding that we are never alone.

K. Avoid Surety 6:1-5

**1 My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, if you have struck hands in pledge for another,
2 if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth,
3 then do this, my son, to free yourself, since you have fallen into your neighbor's hands: Go and humble yourself; press your plea with your neighbor!
4 Allow no sleep to your eyes, no slumber to your eyelids.
5 Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler.**

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary outlines the gist of the whole sixth chapter with: "Warning against suretyship (Prov 6:1-5); against indolence, by the example of the ant (Prov 6:6-11); against crafty mischievousness (Prov 6:12-15); against seven things hateful to the Lord (Prov 6:16-19); against contact with a whorish woman (Prov 6:24-25); prefaced by an introductory setting forth of the blessedness of obeying the commandment, and what it can do for the young in going, sleeping, and waking (Prov 6:20-23)."

Bible scholars have argued whether these first five verses are an interpolation or whether they continue the theme of the fatherly advice in the same vein coming to it from a different angle. A first impression would be that taking responsibility for someone else's finances has little or none to do with purity in a family relationship. This objection pertains not only to the first advice about suretyship but also to the following admonitions regarding sloth, malice and adultery. The theme that links these topics is responsibility and faithfulness. In the previous chapter the young man, who may not even be married, was introduced to the mystery of married love and the building of a family. The emphasis in the preceding chapter was upon love within the bonds of marriage. Sexual relations bring with them obligations. In a marriage the joy of sex is linked to responsibility. That is what connects the various themes. Begetting children without feeling responsible for their upbringing and welfare would amount to criminal neglect. A father is financially responsible for his family. That is why becoming responsible for someone else's debt is considered a crime to the family.

In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, a father said to his son, who is leaving him to go overseas: "Never a borrower or a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry."

The Hebrew word rendered "security" is *arab*, which means "to braid," or "to intermix." It is primarily a term used in the context of doing business. But it is also used to indicate other kinds of guarantee, as in the verse: "Then Judah said to Israel his father, 'Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die. I myself will *guarantee* his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life.'"¹

Barnes' Notes clarifies the cultural background of the times: "In the warnings against this suretyship, in *The Book of Proverbs*, we may trace the influence of contact with the Phoenicians. The merchants of Tyre and Sidon seem to have discovered the value of credit as an element of wealth. A man might obtain goods, or escape the pressure of a creditor at an inconvenient season, or obtain a loan on more

1. Gen. 43:8,9

favorable terms, by finding security. To give such security might be one of the kindest offices which one friend could render to another. Side by side, however, with a legitimate system of credit there sprang up, as in later times, a fraudulent counterfeit. Phoenician or Jewish money-lenders (the 'stranger') were ready to make their loans to the spendthrift. He was equally ready to find a companion (the 'friend') who would become his surety. It was merely a form, just writing a few words, just 'a clasping of the hands' ... in token that the obligation was accepted, and that was all. It would be unfriendly to refuse. And yet, as the teacher warns his hearers, there might be, in that moment of careless weakness, the first link of a long chain of ignominy, galling, fretting, wearing, depriving life of all its peace. The Jewish law of debt, hard and stern like that of most ancient nations, might be enforced against him in all its rigor. Money and land might go, the very bed under him might be seized, and his garment torn from his back (Prov 20:16; 22:27), the older and more lenient law (Ex 22:25-27) having apparently fallen into disuse. He might be brought into a life-long bondage, subject only to the possible relief of the year of jubilee, when the people were religious enough to remember and observe it. His wives, his sons, his daughters might be sharers in that slavery (Neh 5:3-5). It was doubtful whether he could claim the privilege which under Ex 21:2 belonged to an Israelite slave that had been bought. Against such an evil, no warnings could be too frequent or too urgent."

Although this may be difficult to grasp for us who live in a western world and think in the context of a western mindset, we must remember that the mid-eastern person often uses language more symbolic than literal. As in the case of fidelity and intimacy in marriage as a reflection of a spiritual relationship with God, so here also we may assume that more is meant than financial dependence or independence. Becoming financially responsible for a neighbor's irresponsibility makes one a slave of a neighbor's whims. The world is full of people who use schemes and ruses to rob unsuspecting people of their money and livelihood. All these scams are demonically inspired. What the father says here to his son is more than staying away from unwise investments and swindlers. The real point, as in the previous verses, is the enjoyment of the liberty of being a child of God. The Apostle Paul puts this in a wider and more definite context by stating: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."¹ Getting involved in stupid financial deals that rob us of our human freedom and dignity is part of the whole frustrating bondage sin has spread over all of creation as a heavy blanket. As people who are freed by the blood of Christ we must be determined not to become part of such a wicked system. The pictures that conclude this section indicate what is behind the wicked system. "Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler" are images of escaping the snares of the evil one.

There are various forms of slavery. Sin is the ultimate slave master. Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."² Paul states: "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."³ Even those who have been set free by Jesus can be caught in various webs that restrict Christian liberty. In our modern world financial dependence can enslave a person. Our text speaks about the dangers of becoming someone else's surety. Most indebtedness in modern times is caused by the use of credit cards. The father's admonition to the son to give himself no rest until he frees himself from his financial bondage can certainly be applied to our debts toward Visa or MasterCard. A Christian ought to be debt free. We cannot be generous givers and faithful givers of tithe if we are heavily indebted. Paul's advice is: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his

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1. Rom. 8:19-21
 2. John 8:34-36
 3. I Cor. 7:23

fellowman has fulfilled the law.”¹ Satan can use any form of enslavement to pull us back into “the snare of the fowler.”

L. Do Not Be Lazy 6:6-19

6 Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!

7 It has no commander, no overseer or ruler,

8 yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

9 How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?

10 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest —

11 and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.

12 A scoundrel and villain, who goes about with a corrupt mouth,

13 who winks with his eye, signals with his feet and motions with his fingers,

14 who plots evil with deceit in his heart — he always stirs up dissension.

15 Therefore disaster will overtake him in an instant; he will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy.

16 There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him:

17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood,

18 a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil,

19 a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

The warning against laziness is the tenth admonitory discourse in *The Book of Proverbs*. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The ethical connection of this discourse with the preceding has already been pointed out. Sloth militates against prosperity; it is the prolific parent of want, and, even more surely than suretyship, leads to misfortune and ruin. The certainty with which ruin steals upon the sluggard may be the reason why the teacher closes the discourse in the way he does. In the case of suretyship such an issue is uncertain; there is the possibility of escape, the surety may prevail upon his friend to release him from his obligation, and so he may escape ruin; but with sloth no such contingency is possible, its invariable end is disaster.”

Much of the prosperity of the United States of America is ascribed to what is called “Protestant Work Ethics.” This stands for the belief that God has created us as responsible human beings who must assume responsibility and make an honest living by working hard. There can be just as much carnality in hard work as in laziness. We would like to think that all “Protestant Work Ethics” are the evidence of healthy spirituality, but such is not always the case. Real spirituality demonstrates itself in accepting God’s grace and God’s grace will result in greater productivity and success than any carnal human effort can account for. The Apostle Paul testifies: “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”² In the brief ministry on earth of our Lord Jesus Christ we see a demonstration of God’s grace resulting in an outburst of energy and activity that must yet be equaled. The Book of Psalms opens with the description of the person who takes the Word of God seriously: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”³ We find carnal activity and

1. Rom. 13:8

2. I Cor. 15:10

3. Ps. 1:3

laziness in those who live without God, but with those who have surrendered their lives to the Lord there cannot be any trace of sloth.

From the feverish activity in the former section, Solomon moves to “the sluggard.” The Hebrew word is *’atsel*. It occurs only in *The Book of Proverbs* and that fourteen times. The sluggard is sent back to school to learn from creatures that in the order of creation are several degrees below a human being. The obvious purpose of such an object lesson is to create a feeling of shame that leads to a change of attitude. There is no doubt about it that humans are superior to ants. Yet, in the comparison between the ant and the human man is the loser. An understanding of how ants take care of themselves and of one another serves as a serious stimulus to change the way humans live. Throughout the ages scholars have observed the remarkable behavior of these little creatures. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* mentions Aristotle and Plutarch as sources of information about ants.

One of the amazing features of the society of ants is that although they are apparently extremely well organized, there are no appointed leaders who issue orders or supervise activities. A sense of order and duty seems to be inherent in each of the creatures as part of their nature. The lesson to be drawn is that if this is so with ants that are inferior to humans it ought to be more evident in human beings than in any other of the Lord’s creatures. We are the only species God created in His own image and likeness. Sluggards sin against the image of God by being lazy and inactive.

That is not the end of the lesson. It is one thing to provide on the natural and temporal level, it is even more important to make provisions for eternity. Jesus says: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”¹ To be lazy in regard to that need means eternal loss in comparison with which no earthly necessity subsists.

In vv. 12-19 laziness transitions into crime. After all, a person has to stay alive, and if one doesn’t make any efforts to make an honest living, a dishonest living is the only alternative.

The word “scoundrel” in the NIV is the rendering of the Hebrew *’adam beliya’al*. Belial eventually became a name for Satan. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?”² The “scoundrel,” therefore, could be called “a son of the devil” a person in whom the image of God is almost completely eradicated. In the description of the criminal the mouth is mentioned in passing but most of the expression of evil is given in terms of body language. The mouth is called “corrupt.” Which suggests that the person is unable to speak the truth. Evil expresses itself suggestively in winking with the eye, signaling with the feet and motioning with the fingers. The “you know what I mean” attitude conveys the idea of drawing the spectator involved in a secret plot. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, contextualizes this: “Riffraff and rascals talk out of both sides of their mouths. They wink at each other, they shuffle their feet, they cross their fingers behind their backs. Their perverse minds are always cooking up something nasty, always stirring up trouble. Catastrophe is just around the corner for them, a total smash-up, their lives ruined beyond repair.”

The picture is obviously drawn in such vivid colors in order to stand as a warning of the ultimate consequences of a life of irresponsibility and ungodliness. The person who starts slipping usually believes that he can control his fall. A friend of mine used to tell a joke about a man who fell from the top floor of a skyscraper and shouted: “I am fine” as he passed the twentieth floor. My friend concluded by saying it is not the fall, but the sudden stop, that hurts.

The “numerical proverb” is, evidently a Hebrew idiom. We find it several times in *The Book of Proverbs* as well as in other Old Testament books.³ The idiom conveys the concept of totality. “There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him” expresses the deep sense of abhorrence God feels

1. Matt. 6:19-21

2. II Cor. 6:15

3. See Prov. 30:15,18,24; Amos 1:3; Job 5:19.

on the subject. The lesson is that if God hates it that much, so ought we! The following verses indicate that the subject is still the same as in the previous ones; these are the characteristics of the sons of Belial. There is no ascending or descending line in the features; eyes, hands, heart, and feet are placed in a random order. The most serious charge is the crime of murder: "hands that shed innocent blood." The statement about God's absolute hatred of these things serves as a warning about what will await the person who fits the description on the judgment day.

Although the order given does not lead to a climax, there is some meaning in the fact that the list begins with "haughty eyes." Pride is the starting point of all vices, as in the counterpart given by the Apostle Paul, humility is the beginning of all virtue. We read: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."¹ The Apostle John also comments on the same subject by saying: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."² By putting the outcome of pride over against the fruit of humble obedience, John put the subject in a marvelous perspective. Pride will lead to annihilations, but doing the will of God preserves for eternity.

M. Do Not Commit Adultery 6:20—7:27

20 My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

21 Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck.

22 When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you.

23 For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life,

24 keeping you from the immoral woman, from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife.

25 Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes,

26 for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life.

27 Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?

28 Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?

29 So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.

30 Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.

31 Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house.

32 But a man who commits adultery lacks judgment; whoever does so destroys himself.

33 Blows and disgrace are his lot, and his shame will never be wiped away;

34 for jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.

35 He will not accept any compensation; he will refuse the bribe, however great it is.

7:1 My son, keep my words and store up my commands within you.

2 Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye.

3 Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.

4 Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call understanding your kinsman;

5 they will keep you from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words.

6 At the window of my house I looked out through the lattice.

7 I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment.

8 He was going down the street near her corner, walking along in the direction of her house

1. Eph. 4:2,3

2. I John 2:15-17

9 at twilight, as the day was fading, as the dark of night set in.
10 Then out came a woman to meet him, dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.
11 (She is loud and defiant, her feet never stay at home;
12 now in the street, now in the squares, at every corner she lurks.)
13 She took hold of him and kissed him and with a brazen face she said:
14 "I have fellowship offerings at home; today I fulfilled my vows.
15 So I came out to meet you; I looked for you and have found you!
16 I have covered my bed with colored linens from Egypt.
17 I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
18 Come, let's drink deep of love till morning; let's enjoy ourselves with love!
19 My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey.
20 He took his purse filled with money and will not be home till full moon."
21 With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk.
22 All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose
23 till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.
24 Now then, my sons, listen to me; pay attention to what I say.
25 Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths.
26 Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng.
27 Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death.

Verses 20-23 repeat the lines that bind the various fatherly words of advice.¹ This section depicts the most detailed version of adultery or fornication. It is difficult in this context to differentiate between one or the other since, in this case, the prostitute is a married woman, which in modern society would rarely be the case. We maintain, however, that although the text speaks about adultery, it is basically used as an illustration. The real subject is deviation from fellowship with God, presented under the form of following wisdom. This becomes clear when we compare the woman in Chapter Eight with the one in this section.

For a single young man sexual temptation may be the most severe test in life. To use it as a figure of all temptations, as is being done in these chapters, is a very effective way of presenting the truth. The choice is ultimately not between illicit sex and abstinence, but between following wisdom or folly, God or Satan. We come back to what we mentioned before, that in Revelation abuse of power in all of its forms is represented as being intoxicated with the wine of adultery with the great prostitute Babylon.²

Sexual temptation is an appeal to the natural urges of the human body, suggesting that we respond in a way God does not want us to respond. The most effective way to counter sexual temptation is to enter into a affectionate harmonious marriage relationship, giving oneself to the other party body, soul, and spirit. Inasmuch as, according to the Apostle Paul, this profound mystery reflects the relationship of Christ and the church,³ we may say that illicit sex stands for a liaison with the powers of darkness.

Having said this, we must look at the details of the picture Solomon has drawn for us. Vv. 24-29 refer to the temptation in general terms. The immoral woman fakes love but demands a price that is out of proportion to what she offers. She seems to sell herself cheaply but, as it turns out, the price is more than anyone can afford. The Prov NIV reads: "the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread" (v. 26). Eugene H. Peterson's *Proverbs* paraphrases this: "You can buy an hour with a whore for a loaf of bread." But the price of prostitution is one's very soul, which is more precious than the whole world. We deduct this from Jesus' words: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man

1. See Prov. 1:8,9; 4:1,2.

2. See Rev. 17:1-6.

3. See Eph. 5:31,32.

give in exchange for his soul?”¹ The text is very graphic in giving the example of scooping fire in one’s lap, burning one’s clothes and walking on hot coals, burning one’s feet.

The author qualifies the sin of adultery as the most serious of all by comparing it to someone who steals bread because he is hungry. There is an excuse for that kind of petty crime. But a jealous husband will have no lenience for someone who sleeps with his wife. God calls Himself the most jealous of all, when He says in the Ten Commandments: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”² Those words are spoken in the context of idolatry.

Chapter Seven opens with the same kind of introductory remarks as the other sections that contain the father’s advice to his son. They are comparable to Jesus’ use of the words “Amen, Amen” in John’s Gospel.³ The parallel to “words” is “commands,” which emphasizes the need for absolute obedience. The father moves here beyond a word of advice to an order that demands submission. The son’s very life depends on whether he submits or not. The picture of “the apple of your eye” indicates how vital obedience to the Word is for the preservation of one’s sight. No body part is so sensitive as the apple of the eye. We keep our eyes lubricated and our eyelids respond immediately to any intrusion by foreign bodies. Some people tie a string to their finger when they want to remind themselves of something that would cost them dearly if they were to forget it. The Word of God must become our very nature, so that our automatic clock will remind us of what needs to be done. Having that Word written in our heart will make it impossible for us to forget it. Calling “wisdom” our “sister,” means that we are related to her. Bonds of blood tie us together. All this to say that sin is unnatural, as unnatural as death.

In vv. 6-23 the father draws one of the most vivid pictures of temptation to sin found in all of Scripture. He looks through his upstairs window and sees a prostitute in action, seducing a silly youngster. The kid is called “simple,” rendering the Hebrew word *pethiy*. The word occurs sixteen times in *The Book of Proverbs*. It can be translated “naïf.” Immaturity can have disastrous consequences in moments of temptation. When naiveté keeps us from being able to see the difference between good and evil we are on very dangerous grounds. As the author of Hebrews writes to his readers: “You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”⁴

The first thing that was wrong with the boy was that he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Walking in the red light district at twilight is the surest recipe for temptation. We get the impression that the youth did not know where he was. Having the natural and intimate relationship with the Word of God that was presented in the opening verses of this chapter will allow us to know where we are at all points in our life.

The second thing that was wrong with the youngster was that he was not turned off by the boisterousness of the woman. Her kisses turned him on instead of off and the seemingly pious words about the food she brought home from the temple sacrifice made him want to believe that it was all right to go home with her. The reference to a fellowship offering suggests that this woman had been to the temple and brought a sacrifice indicating that her relationship with God was good. The person who brought a peace or fellowship offering was allowed to take some of the food home for private consumption.⁵ Since the meat of that sacrifice had to be eaten on the day it was brought, the woman suggests to the boy to come home with her because she had too much food to eat alone and needs his help. In modern terms she could have said: “I

1. Matt. 16:26

2. Ex. 20:5

3. See John 1:51; 3:3,5,11; 5:19,24,25; 6:26,32,47,53; 8:34,51,58; 10:1,7; 12:24; 13:16,20,21,38; 14:12; 16:20,23; 21:18.

4. Heb. 5:12-14

5. See Lev. 7:12-15.

was at a church supper and brought home some of the leftovers that have to be eaten today. They won't be any good tomorrow. It would be a shame to have to throw it away!" After this pious introduction, she comes to the point and offers the boy a night of sex. *The Pulpit Commentary* refers to the rendering of the Septuagint, "With the snares of her lips she ran him aground drove him headlong to ruin."

Some Bible scholars believe that the woman was a foreigner, who only outwardly observed the Jewish religious rites without having any spiritual understanding of them. As *Barnes' Notes* observes: "If we assume, as probable, that these harlots of Jerusalem were mainly of Phoenician origin, the connection of their worship with their sin would be but the continuation of their original 'cultus'." There is no reason, however, to believe that the woman would not be an Israelite. The fact that she refers to her husband makes this more reasonable.

Vv. 21-23 describe the harm done to the young man's soul with the drawing of three pictures of animals going toward their death without knowing what awaits them. The ox that is being led away to be slaughtered does not know what will happen to him. The deer and the bird have only eye for the bait that is laid out before them, not knowing a deathtrap awaits them. The arrow that splits the deer's liver causes no instant death but a painful and inescapable one. No picture better illustrates the disastrous consequences of giving in to temptation than this deadly arrow. This caricature of love's enjoyments leads to death of the soul. God intends our sexuality to be used as an expression of affection and oneness within the bonds of marriage to reflect our spiritual relationship with Him in Jesus Christ. Satan reduces this high gift to "a one-night stand," without the warmth of love or obligation, to mock the character of God. That is death at its worst! It is only a fool who is willing to pay with his life for an experience that brings no lasting joy or satisfaction. Compare what this evil woman has to offer with what David states about his fellowship with God: "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."¹ "Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death."

N. Praise of Wisdom 8:1—9:12

- 1 Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice?*
- 2 On the heights along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand;*
- 3 beside the gates leading into the city, at the entrances, she cries aloud:*
- 4 "To you, O men, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind.*
- 5 You who are simple, gain prudence; you who are foolish, gain understanding.*
- 6 Listen, for I have worthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right.*
- 7 My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness.*
- 8 All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse.*
- 9 To the discerning all of them are right; they are faultless to those who have knowledge.*
- 10 Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold,*
- 11 for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.*
- 12 "I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion.*
- 13 To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.*
- 14 Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have understanding and power.*
- 15 By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just;*
- 16 by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth.*
- 17 I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.*
- 18 With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity.*

1. Ps. 16:11

19 *My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver.*
 20 *I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice,*
 21 *bestowing wealth on those who love me and making their treasuries full.*
 22 *"The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old;*
 23 *I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began.*
 24 *When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water;*
 25 *before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth,*
 26 *before he made the earth or its fields or any of the dust of the world.*
 27 *I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,*
 28 *when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,*
 29 *when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command,*
 30 *Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence,*
 31 *rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.*
 32 *"Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways.*
 33 *Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it.*
 34 *Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway.*
 35 *For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the LORD.*
 36 *But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death."*
 9:1 *Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars.*
 2 *She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table.*
 3 *She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the highest point of the city.*
 4 *"Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment.*
 5 *"Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed.*
 6 *Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding.*
 7 *"Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse.*
 8 *Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you.*
 9 *Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.*
 10 *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*
 11 *For through me your days will be many, and years will be added to your life.*
 12 *If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer."*

In this great section "Wisdom" goes public in more or less the same manner as "the public woman," the prostitute in the previous chapter. Thus far wisdom had been hidden from public view as a treasure that must be discovered. Now the veil is rent and the mystery is revealed. "Revelation" is the keyword for the understanding of this passage. This establishes the relationship between what is stated here and the words in John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."¹ Wisdom is, of course, a divine attribute, but *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes correctly: "'Wisdom' is here personal Wisdom, the Son of God. For many personal predicates are attributed to Him: Thus, subsistence by or with God, in Prov 8:30; just as John 1:1 saith, 'The Word was with God,' which cannot be said of a mere attribute."

The opening words "Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice?" are more than a Hebrew idiom that states known facts in the form of a question. The question-form here emphasizes the fact that no one has any valid excuses for ignoring wisdom's appeal. She is heard loud and clear.

Those addressed are particularly those exemplified in the young man in the previous chapter, "the simple," *pethiy*, the naïf, those who are in danger of falling into the temptation of sin. The public way in

1. John 1:14

which wisdom is revealed will make it impossible for anyone, standing before the judgment seat of God to say “I did not know.” It is true, of course, that the Gospel message is not heard in every corner of the world, but that does not mean that man has a valid excuse for the sins he commits. In Paul’s words: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”¹

Derek Kidner, in his commentary *Proverbs*, calls this chapter “Wisdom’s apologia.” He states: “The praise of wisdom, which has welled up at many points already, now breaks out in full flow, in a sustained appeal of great beauty and immense range. The increasing boldness of the thought, culminating in 22-31, is not designed to preoccupy the reader with metaphysics but to stir him to decision: the true climax is the ‘Now therefore ...’ passage of 32-36. The progress of the thought may be traced somewhat as follows: wisdom is (a) the would-be guide of Everyman (1-5), (b) the partner of morality (6-13), (c) the key to all success (14-21), (d) the very principle of creation (22-31), and (e) the one necessity of life (32-36).” On the first five verses of this chapter, Kidner comments: “A chapter which is to soar beyond time and space, opens at street-level, to make it clear, first, that the wisdom of God is as relevant to the shopping-center (2,3) as to heaven itself (22); second, that it is available to the veriest dunce (5); ... third, that it is active in seeking us – so that our own search, earnest as it has to be (17, 34), is a response, not an uncertain quest.”

Wisdom characterizes her words as “worthy, right, true, and just.” The Hebrew word, rendered “worthy” (excellent in the KJV) is *nagiyd*, which literally means “leader.” It is an authoritative word because of the one who speaks it. In comparison with human speech the Word of God has incomparable authority. God’s Word is creative: “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”² “Right” is the translation of the Hebrew word *meyshar*, meaning “evenness.” It conveys a sense of harmony. “True,” *emeth* also stands for “stability.” And “right” is the equivalent of the Hebrew *tsedeq*, meaning “that which is natural, moral or legal.” Interestingly, “truth” is contrasted with “wickedness” and “just” with “perversity.” There is in Wisdom’s words an appeal to our conscience, that inner voice that whispers to us and shows us what we naturally know to be true.

Having picked her place, which Kidner calls “the shopping-center,” Wisdom launches her appeal particularly to “the simple,” those who, as we saw above, need to gain the experience that allows them to make an intelligent choice between good and evil. Against the background of “the business world” Wisdom points out the way to true riches. The purpose of business is the acquisition of wealth. In spite of what advertisements may proclaim, no business exists for the mere purpose of helping people in need; business is interested in a man’s wallet, not his soul. “Gold and silver” represent a security against unforeseen risks and disasters; it symbolizes independence and ease. The majority of people believe that if they have enough money they will be happy and life will be easy and enjoyable. The fact that reality does not bear out this assumption does not seem to bother anyone. Possession of money is supposed to keep death at a safe distance; it is supposed to be good for one’s soul. For most people, Jesus’ question: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”³ does not seem to need an answer, at least not now. And His advice: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”⁴ is heeded by few. Yet the truly rich are those who are, like the Apostle Paul, “poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”⁵

1. Rom. 1:20

2. Ps. 33:9

3. Matt. 16:26

4. Matt. 6:19-21

5. II Cor. 6:10

The words “simple” and “prudence” have become part of a familiar vocabulary to those who study *The Book of Proverbs*.

In the first eleven verses of this chapter, Wisdom has shown her influence upon the infrastructure of human society. People who fear the Lord and respond to Him by leading good and moral lives will run the world like a smoothly oiled machine. The members of society will live in peace; have food, shelter and health and a reasonable amount of joy. In vv. 12-21 Wisdom moves up to the higher level of government.

The words “To fear the LORD is to hate evil” add another dimension to the concept of fear. Fear of the Lord is different from fear of evil, yet the two kinds of fear compliment each other. We are afraid of evil because of what it can do to us, but we fear the Lord because we stand in awe of Him. Those who fear evil take evil as seriously as they do the Lord. To treat evil lightly and to play around with it is a demonstration of pride and arrogance of attitude and of perversity in behavior and use of language. The audience of Wisdom’s time consisted of princes and kings. Republics and democracies had not yet emerged. The success of a ruler, whether king or president, depends largely on his choosing of a staff of wise assistants. If Lady Wisdom plays a role in the cabinet and becomes chief of staff, the country will have righteous laws, the judicial system will work well, the land will be blessed and the king will receive the credit. After all, human authority is a reflection of God’s power. Those who reign do so by the grace of God. The promises of wealth and prosperity will not be limited to the ruling classes but will filter down to the lower echelons of society. The health and wealth preaching of “the Green Gospel” is, of course, a lie. But there is always an element of truth in every lie. Satan will make sure that none of his statements are one hundred percent false. God will bless those who love Him and His righteousness.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, asks the question: “Are the benefits material or immaterial?” His answer: “Certainly both, but predominantly the latter. If men in authority (15, 16) need wisdom, it is for justice, not advantage. If *riches* (18) are conferred by it, they are coupled with *honor* and *righteousness* (and though righteousness could have its secondary meaning, prosperity, in 18 – so RSV – it must have its primary, moral sense in 20, where RSV concurs). Verse 19 puts the matter beyond doubt, and goes even further than 10, 11. Wisdom not only excels gold as the source takes precedence over the product; wisdom’s product is better than gold. That product may include prosperity, but only as part of a far bigger whole, which will be specified in 35 as life and divine favor.”

The principle is clearly illustrated in Solomon’s life. When the young king had a dream at Gibeon and the Lord appeared to him, God asked him what he wanted for a coronation present. Solomon answered: “Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?” We read: “The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, ‘Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both riches and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.’”¹

In considering the beautiful section of vv. 22-31, we must remember that we are looking at poetry. This is not a scientific or precise account of creation. The poet tries to capture the soul of the matter, sometimes defying logic in the process. Poetry can help us to draw us closer to the essence of what must be understood and come to a better understanding of its meaning by emphasizing the beauty of the matter. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, calls this paragraph “Wisdom’s role in creation.” We read: “This section is ushered in by the emphatic *The Lord*. Here is wisdom’s prime credential, presented with wonderful artistry. First, wisdom is what Yahweh as Creator counted primary and indispensable. Second, wisdom is both older than the universe, and fundamental to it. Not a speck of matter (26b), not a trace of order (29), came into existence but by wisdom. Third, wisdom is the spring of joy, for joy breaks out whenever (30b) and wherever (31) the Creator’s wisdom is exercised. Joy of creating and joy of existence – the Maker’s and the

1. I Kings 3:9-13

creature's delight – both flow from the exercise of divine wisdom; that is, from God's perfect workmanship.”

These verses constitute some of the best Biblical support for what modern science calls “Intelligent Design.” The fact that wisdom is personified here and that the Apostle Paul identifies Jesus Christ as God's wisdom,¹ should not lead us to conclude that the two portions are identical. It is true that, according to John's Gospel, the Word which became flesh, was God's prime instrument of creation.² But we cannot conclude on the basis of these verses in Proverbs that the Father created the Son. If “the Word was God,” as John states, He is uncreated and eternal as the Father. The scene in Proverbs differs from the context of Paul's words. Solomon speaks about wisdom in the framework of creation, Paul in connection with salvation.

The wording of v. 22: “The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works” has caused much controversy among Bible scholars who interpreted this as if God created wisdom, and by implication that Jesus Christ as Second Person of the Trinity was inferior to the Father. The Hebrew word, rendered “brought forth” is *qanah*, which can mean “to create,” but also “to purchase,” or “to own.” We find the word for the first time in the verse: “Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, ‘With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.’ ” It occurs at least eleven times in *The Book of Proverbs*, the first time in 1:5 – “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.” The KJV is closest to the original with: “The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way.” This makes it clear, what was obvious to begin with, that wisdom is a divine attribute, and not something God had to create in order to possess it.

Although the word picture is consistent, as though wisdom was created (brought forth, v. 22, given birth, vv.24, 25), we must see this as a poetic representation, not a factual one. Even a superficial glance at creation, from the atoms to the galaxies, from the inert to the living, from the functioning of the body to the depth of the soul, will make us stand in awe of the supreme intelligence of the one who drew the plans for it all. To conclude that logic and intelligence are random products of chemical reactions nullifies its own definition. Even some of the malfunctionings that man's fall into sin produced cannot deny the marvel of wisdom that is at the basis of all existence.

Actually, v. 23, “I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began” sets the record straight. “Eternity” denotes the uncreated character of wisdom. We understand the parallel “from the beginning” to mean “before the creation of time.” The Hebrew word for “beginning” here is *ro'sh*, which literally means to shake the head; from it is derived *re'shiyth*, which is the word used for “beginning” in the opening verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”³

The NIV's reading of v. 27 – “I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep” does not make too much sense. “Marking out the horizon on the face of the deep” is difficult for us to understand since, in our experience the horizon would be above the surface and the deep is below. The Hebrew is even more mysterious. A literal reading is “When He set a compass upon the face of the depth.” The Hebrew word translated “compass” is *chuwg*, which literally means “a circle.” The Living Bible is probably clearest with: “I was there when he set the limits of the seas and gave them his instructions not to spread beyond their boundaries.” *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* suggests that there is here a reference to the law of gravity. We read: “Does not this refer to the establishment of the law of gravitation? by which all the particles of matter, tending to a common center, would produce in all bodies the orbicular form, which we see them have; so that even the waters are not only retained within their boundaries, but are subjected to the circular form, in their great aggregate of seas, as other parts of matter are. This is called here making a compass, *b^cchuwqow chuwg*, sweeping a circle; and even this on the face of the deep, to bring the chaotic mass into form, regularity, and order.”

1. See I Cor. 1:30.
2. See John 1:1-3.
3. Gen. 1:1

The main focus in Wisdom's account of creation here is the water. She says: "I was there before water was created in any of its places, oceans, springs, and clouds." The Genesis record is silent about the formation of the mountains. We only read about the separation of sea and dry land on the third day.¹

Vv. 30 and 31 are an interpretation of what the Genesis record states as "And God saw that it was good."² God's declaration that what He had created was good caused Him delight and joy. This seems to have been the case particularly in regard to the creation of mankind. Man is unique in all of God's creation. We are His masterpiece because we are made in His image and likeness. That is the reason for His delight in us. This delight will reach its pinnacle when the image is fully restored in our salvation and sanctification.

In the last section of this chapter, vv. 32-36, Wisdom returns from her cosmic tour and again fixes her eye upon the boys standing in front of her. Wisdom's hope is that, having concluded with the remarks about God's delight in mankind, this joy of the Lord would exercise enough of a pull upon the heart of her youthful hearers to make them listen and decide to follow her through life. Standing daily at Wisdom's door is the opposite of the foolish boy's loitering in the red light district in the previous chapter.

There is a strange assumption among people who have never established a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ that spiritual life is dull and that indulging in sinful activities is fun. There is nothing pleasant about self-destruction and death. Death is the ugliest enemy we can encounter. He who willfully seeks his company is weaned of all wisdom.

In Chapter Nine we find a description of two feasts, one organized by Lady Wisdom and one by Lady Folly. Unfortunately, our outline ends with Wisdom's feast and does not include both under the same heading. The two pictures are drawn to impress upon us the importance of the warnings that were given previously. This illustrates the saying that one picture is worth a thousand words.

The image of fellowship with God, as accepting an invitation to a banquet, occurs several times in the Bible. Jesus used the illustration for one of His parables³ and in Revelation we read about the wedding supper of the Lamb.⁴ In a way, Wisdom's banquet prefigures the other two that illustrate salvation in its beginning and consummation.

Over the centuries Bible scholars have weighed down this chapter with all kinds of allegorical meaning. Since it is obvious that an allegory is meant, this is quite understandable, but we must be careful not to read too much factual meaning in what is given as poetry. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Spiritual writers see here two references — one to Christ's incarnation, when he built for himself a human body (... John 2:19); and another to his work in forming the Church, which is his mystical body (... 1 Peter 2:5). And the sublime language used in this section is not satisfied with the bare notion that we have here only an allegorical representation of Wisdom calling followers to her. Rather we are constrained to see a Divine intimation of the office and work of Christ, not only the Creator of the world, as in ch. 8., but its Regenerator."

V. 1 describes the place which is especially built for the purpose of having a banquet. This is not, like the house of the prostitute, a private home used for multiple purposes, but a new creation dedicated to an exclusive event. Wisdom's banquet hall is her own creation. We have the impression that she did all the work herself even to the point of hewing out the pillars. The Hebrew word for "to hew" is *chatsab*, which means "to cut or carve." The beautiful ornamental chiseling is Wisdom's own creation. After the description of Wisdom's involvement in God's creation in the previous chapter, we understand that the building depicted in this chapter is a new creation. The number seven is, of course, not accidental; it stands for perfection.

1. Gen. 1:9,10

2. See Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31.

3. See Matt. 22:1-14.

4. Rev. 19:9

V. 2 gives us the menu of the feast, consisting of meat and wine. The NIV simply reads “She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table.” The Hebrew is more elaborate with: “She has killed her beasts; she has mingled her wine; she has also furnished her table.” The indirect reference to death in the slaughter of the animals suggests that there is a provision for the sinful condition of the guests who are invited. The Israelites of old never ate meat of which, at least a portion, had not been dedicated to the Lord. Without pushing the application of the allegory too far, we do see a reference to sacrifice in the menu of the banquet. The life-giving banquet of Wisdom is not a vegetarian dish but one in which blood had flowed and flesh was cut up. Wisdom’s dish ultimately consists of the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ who said: “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.”¹

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary states about the wine: “Among the ancient Jews, Greek, and Romans, wine was rarely drank without being mingled with water; and among ancient writers we find several ordinances for this. Some direct three parts of water to one of wine; some five parts; and Pliny mentions some wines that required twenty waters, but the most common proportions appear to have been three parts of water to two of wine. But probably the *yayin maacak*, mingled wine, was wine mingled, not with water, to make it weaker; but with spices and other ingredients to make it stronger. The ingredients were honey, myrrh, mandragora, opium, and such like, which gave it not only an intoxicating but stupefying quality also. Perhaps the mixed wine here may mean wine of the strongest and best quality, that which was good to cheer and refresh the heart of man. If we consider the mixed wine as meaning this strong wine, then the import of the metaphor will be, a thorough investigation of the works of God will invigorate the soul, strengthen all the mental powers, enlarge their capacity, and enable the mind to take the most exalted views of the wonders of God’s skill manifested in the operations of his hand.”

The same commentary quotes a poet by Pope:

“A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
For scanty draughts intoxicate the brain,
But drinking largely sobers us again.”

Vv. 3-6 give us the guest list and the text of the invitation as well as how the invitations are given out. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “What wisdom constructs is spacious and enduring (1), what it offers is princely (2); the incongruous feature (and our Lord took this up) is the company, called in from the streets, the guests’ deficiency their only qualification (4).”

Jesus’ Parable of the Wedding Banquet borrows heavily from Lady Wisdom’s feast.² In Jesus’ parable the emphasis is on the qualifications of the guests. Kidner stated correctly that “the guests’ deficiency their only qualification” but Jesus adds that accepting the robe of righteousness which is given out at the door is the ultimate entrance requirement. We read: “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are invited, but few are chosen.”³

The NIV reads: “She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the highest point of the city” (v.3). Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this: “Having dismissed her serving maids, Lady Wisdom goes to town, stands in a prominent place, and invites everyone within sound of her voice.” But there is no contradiction in Wisdom’s sending out her maids and the fact that it is her call that goes out from the highest

1. John 6:53-56
2. See Matt. 22:1-14.
3. Matt. 22:11-14

point of the city. The words of the maids are the words of their mistress. No one who speaks the Word of God speaks of his own.

Lady Wisdom's invitation is picked up by Isaiah. Although the context is different the content of the message is the same: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live."¹ Wisdom speaks in terms of judgment and understanding, appealing to the reason. Isaiah lures people with a promise of fulfillment. Interestingly, it is the woman who stresses the head and the man who emphasizes the heart.

A superficial glance at vv. 7-9 gives the impression that they do not fit into the context of the invitation. Kidner remarks in *Proverbs*: "This collection of maxims does not give the impression of having been written specifically for this context; some scholars would therefore delete it or (as Moffatt) relegate it to the end. But its subject and position are both significant. Its position allows the chapter (and section of the book) to end on a shattering climax (18); its content corrects the impression that men are saved or lost merely through an isolated, impulsive decision. The choice is seen ripening into character and so into destiny." *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "These verses form a parenthesis, showing why Wisdom addresses only the simple and foolish. She giveth not that which is holy unto dogs, nor casteth pearls before swine (... Matthew 7:6)." On the verse "Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse," the Commentary continues: "Such a proceeding results in disgrace to himself. This is not said to discourage the virtuous from reproofing transgressors, but states the effect which experience proves to occur in such cases. Prudence, caution, and tact are needed in dealing with these characters. Evil men regard the reprover as a personal enemy, and treat him with contumely, and hence arise unseemly bickerings and disputes, injurious words and deeds. To have wasted teaching on such unreceptive and antagonistic natures is a shameful expenditure of power. St. Gregory thus explains this matter: 'It generally happens that when they cannot defend the evils that are reproofed in them, they are rendered worse from a feeling of shame, and carry themselves so high in their defense of themselves, that they take out bad points to urge against the life of the reprover, and so they do not account themselves guilty, if they fasten guilty deeds upon the heads of others also. And when they are unable to find true ones, they feign them, that they may also themselves have things they may seem to rebuke with no inferior degree of justice' "

Having concluded here "aside," Wisdom returns to that which is the theme of the book: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." There is no reason to believe that these words are not part of the message addressed to "the simple," the naïf ones who have not yet committed themselves to following the narrow path that leads to life. "The fear of the LORD" is a reality check. Fearing God means to understand with whom we are dealing, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Seeing our relationship in the proper light is indeed the beginning of wisdom because it will make us understand who He is and who we are and to adjust our behavior accordingly. Not only that, but beginning to know God will lead to salvation. In Jesus' words: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."² Wisdom puts this same truth in terms of time with: "For through me your days will be many, and years will be added to your life." This does not mean that eternal life is merely a matter of having years added endlessly; it is also the quality of life that makes it eternal. It is life that consists in a relationship with God in which His will becomes our sole delight that makes it eternal. In John's words: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."³ The Living Bible paraphrases v. 12 beautifully with: "Wisdom is its own reward, and if you scorn her, you hurt only yourself."

All this is stated in Wisdom's invitation to her banquet. In our search for wisdom, we join the feast. Fearing God is a celebration. As we saw earlier, Wisdom's banquet had hidden references to death in the

1. Isa. 55:1-3a
2. John 17:3
3. I John 2:17

slaughter of the animals that provide the meat. Wisdom's feast is a Passover celebration that commemorates deliverance from slavery. As Paul states: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."¹ The basis of the transforming power of eating Wisdom's food is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

O. Avoid Folly 9:13-18

13 The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge.

14 She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city,

15 calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way.

16 "Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment.

17 "Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!"

18 But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave.

There is no reason to believe that these verses are not part of Wisdom's invitation. Since accepting her invitation is a matter of choice, it makes sense to state an alternative. Jesus did this when He said: "'Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."² It is only fair to understand what we are choosing and what would be the consequences of not choosing. Walking on the broad way seems to mean not making a choice since it is the easiest of the roads to follow. But not choosing is also a choice.

We find Miss Folly at the same place as Wisdom's emissaries, "the highest point of the city." It is obvious that there can only be one highest point in a city. The prostitute has established herself at that point. "She sits at the door of her house." She thrives on publicity and advertisement. When Wisdom sends her maidens there, she evangelizes, sending her envoys in enemy territory. Wisdom's invitation is still the only light that shines in the dark world in which we live.

Vv. 13-15 are obviously Wisdom's assessment of her opponent. She is loud, but what she says has not content. Rather, what she says is not true and the decibels of her song are meant to cover up the lie, or to hide the emptiness of what she has to offer. She is called "undisciplined," which is the translation of the Hebrew word *pethayuwth*, which is derived from a word meaning "silliness." This is the only place in Scripture where this word is used. The RSV, adopting the reading of the Septuagint, renders v. 13 "A foolish woman is noisy; she is wanton and knows no shame." *The Pulpit Commentary* states about "She is simple": "Hebrew, 'simplicity,' in a bad sense; she has no preservative against evil, no moral fiber to resist temptation." The Hebrew word for "simple" in v. 16 is not the same word as in v. 13. That word recurs fifteen times in *The Book of Proverbs* and refers to those who are naïve and have not yet set foot on the road to life.

The temptress appeals to our warped sinful nature by suggesting that there is an enjoyment in doing something illegal, which is not found in doing the right thing. Whisper to a child: "Come here, I'll tell you a secret" and you have his immediate attention. It was the secrecy of the matter that appealed to Eve and made her attribute to the forbidden fruit, qualities it did not possess. "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it."³ The tempters tactics have not changed.

1. I Cor. 5:7,8

2. Matt. 7:13,14

3. Gen. 3:6

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The metaphor of ‘stolen waters’ refers primarily to adulterous intercourse, as to ‘drink waters out of one’s own cistern’ (...Proverbs 5:15...) signifies the chaste connection of lawful wedlock. Wisdom offered flesh and wine to her guests; Folly offers bread and water. Wisdom invites openly to a well furnished table; Folly calls to a secret meal of barest victuals. What the former offers is rich and satisfying and comforting; what Vice gives is poor and mean and insipid. Yet this latter has the charm of being forbidden; it is attractive because it is unlawful. This is a trait of corrupt human nature, which is recognized universally.” Wisdom points to the graveyard behind Miss Folly’s house.

III. Proverbs of Solomon 10:1—24:34

A. Proverbs Contrasting the Godly and the Wicked 10:1—15:33

Here we enter the main body of *The Book of Proverbs*. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, this third section of the book, between Chapters Ten and Twenty-Two, contain 375 proverbs by Solomon. Most of them contain the words “A wise son.” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “As wisdom comprises all moral excellence, and folly is vice and perversity, the opposite characters attributed to the son are obvious. The mother is introduced for the sake of parallelism; though some commentators suggest that as the father would be naturally elated by his son’s virtues, which would conduce to honor and high estate, so the mother would be grieved at vices which her training had not subdued, and her indulgence had fostered.”

The preceding nine chapters can be considered to be the introduction to the hundreds of following aphorisms. It is difficult to catalogue to the whole section of Solomon’s Proverbs in a clear and comprehensive way. The whole section actually covers Chapters Ten through Twenty-two. We will therefore, look at each chapter individually, instead of copying the whole text in one lump sum.

Chapter Ten:

10:1 The proverbs of Solomon: A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother.

The moral choices we make do not only affect our own person but also those to whom we are related. If we choose the path of wisdom our family will experience the blessing of it. This goes in both directions. God states in the Ten Commandments: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.”¹ If a parent chooses idolatry over serving the Lord (which seems to be the context of the warning), future generations will fall under the influence of the powers of darkness. Since parents are meant to be role models, their influence upon their children can be enormous, either positive or negative.

On the other hand, children can be joy bringers or heartbreakers to their parents. The Apostle John wrote: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”² In this proverb the wise son is he who has chosen to follow wisdom because he has come to understand the reality of God’s character. The joy of the father and the grief of the mother are not merely poetic parallels in this verse; they depict the different roles parents play in a child’s life. The strong love of a father gives protection that makes a child feel safe and the warm emotional love of the mother makes him feel accepted and wanted. God wants us to learn about His love for us, both boys and girls, in the way our parents model it for us. Unfortunately,

1. Ex. 20:5,6

2. 3 John 4

many of us have grown up getting the wrong signals or getting too few of the right ones. One wonders how well Solomon, who said this, conveyed God's love to his children and which of his one thousand wives is the grieving one in this proverb!

2 *Ill-gotten treasures are of no value, but righteousness delivers from death.*

3 *The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.*

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, puts above these verses the heading: "Righteousness is the best security." He comments: "Such sayings are true at four levels – logical, providential, spiritual, eternal – though the fourth is beyond the normal horizon of Proverbs ... That is, (a) sin, seen as folly, sets up strains in the structure of life which can only end in breakdown; (b) however much rope God gives us, He remains in control; (c) whatever their worldly state, the righteous are truly rich (*cf.* 20-22); (d) in the world to come justice will be complete."

The keyword in these two verses is "craving." The Hebrew word is *havvah*, which means "desire," but usually in the negative sense of "coveting." It is the harmful yearning of an addiction. To have treasures or to be rich is in itself no sin. God blesses some people with material abundance. But most people want wealth as an insurance that gives them the illusion of being independent from God. The right relationship with God provides righteousness which is the only insurance we need in life.

The word "value" raises the question as to how wealth is accumulated and why. "Craving" suggested already that something is wrong with the acquisition. The treasures are "ill-gotten," that is they were not God-given and fellow humans being were hurt in the process. The reason for the accumulation was to protect against death. The fact that, as the saying goes, "You can't take it with you" shows the silliness of the human mind. Wealth does not even provide the independence that it is supposed to impart. Abundance of food does not guarantee satisfaction.

4 *Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.*

5 *He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.*

These two verses serve as a compliment to the preceding one. The fact that God is the great provider for all our needs does not reduce us to non-activity. Grace does not make us lazy but it focuses us on the right priority. "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."¹ Paul testifies: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."²

The Hebrew uses two different words for "hand": *kaph*, which means "the hollow of the hand or the palm" and *yad*, indicating "the open hand," as opposed to the closed one. The two words are used metaphorically to show uselessness and effectiveness. It needs no comment that the hand is merely the tool of the person. Laziness or energy are traits of character, not physical qualities.

If v. 4 deals with disposition, v. 5 speaks about opportunity. We must not only do with all our might what we are supposed to do, but we must also know when to do it. "Harvest" is more than the time of the year when the crops must be hauled in and stored up; it is the right time to do the right thing. The prophet Haggai illustrates this with: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.' Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: 'Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?' "³ It

1. Matt. 6:33

2. I Cor. 15:10

3. Hag. 1:2,3

pertains to what the Apostle Paul calls: “redeeming the time.”¹ To know the right time is a spiritual gift. We read about the “men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”² Jesus reproached the people of His day: “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”³ And the Apostle Paul advises: “And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”⁴ Knowing the right time is the equivalent of knowing the will of God. And God only reveals His will to those who are willing to obey.

6 Blessings crown the head of the righteous, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.

The Hebrew reads literally: “Blessings are upon the head of the just, but the mouth of the wicked covers violence.” The Living Bible paraphrases this: “The good man is covered with blessings from head to foot, but an evil man inwardly curses his luck.” Although this makes for smooth reading, it may distort the meaning. *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “The meaning is perhaps, the violence which the wicked has done is as a bandage over his mouth, reducing him to a silence and shame, like that of the leper (Lev 13:45; Mic 3:7) or the condemned criminal (Est 7:8), whose ‘face is covered.’” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The contrast is between the manifest blessedness of the righteous and the secret sinister proceedings of the evil.”

Although the Hebrew does not use the word “crown” it conveys the idea of honor. God’s blessing makes us honorable if we are covered with the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ and we practice His righteousness in our daily living. The covered mouth of the wicked, may indeed suggest that we condemn ourselves when confronted with God’s holiness as the man who was discovered without the robe of righteousness about whom we read: “The man was speechless.”⁵

7 The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot.

This verse takes us to the cemetery to read the eulogies of the deceased. It is true that, at a funeral, people will rarely emphasize the negative aspects of the dead. In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, however, Mark Anthony proclaimed at Caesar’s funeral: “The evil that men do lives after them; the good is often interred with their bones; So it be with Caesar.” But Mark Anthony was politically motivated and intended to expose Caesar’s murderers, not to blame the deceased.

The question is “How will we be remembered?” It is in the context of a funeral that the Teacher in Ecclesiastes says: “A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.”⁶ In spite of the Teacher’s gloom, we understand that he does not say that death is better than life, but that death provides a better evaluation of the quality of life that was lived. It is when the balance is drawn that we can see what is left. The teacher’s comparison with perfume speaks about the scent of a life, which reminds us of Paul’s statement: “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”⁷ The

1. Col. 4:5 (KJV)
2. I Chron. 12:32
3. Matt. 16:2,3
4. Rom. 13:11
5. See Matt. 22:12.
6. Eccl. 7:1
7. II Cor. 2:15,16

smell of our life will remain after death. Most tombstones tell lies, but no one is deceived by the fragrance of righteousness or the stench of putrefaction.

8 The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin.

9 The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.

The interesting conclusion that can be drawn from these verses is the relationship between wisdom and obedience and the central place wisdom occupies in it. It is our obedience to the will of God that will make wisdom part of our innermost being. The comparison between the wise person and the fool suggests that the wise, in contrast to the fool, choose their words carefully. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on the second part of this verse: “Even in human fields of learning it is the second-rater who tends to ‘talk big.’” The Hebrew word, rendered in the NIV “comes to ruin” is *labat*. It occurs only twice in *The Book of Proverbs*, both times in this chapter. It suggests a violent overthrow rather than a slow deterioration.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary comments: “Of all fools, none more troublesome than the prating fools, nor that more expose themselves; but they shall fall into sin, into hell, because they received not commandments. Those that are full of tongue seldom look well to their feet, and therefore stumble and fall.”

V. 9 basically proclaims the same truth as v. 8. The NIV’s “crooked paths” fails to bring out the meaning of the Hebrew that states that it is the person who perverts his ways. The NKJV is closer to the original with: “He who walks with integrity walks securely, But he who perverts his ways will become known.” The Hebrew word *`aqash* means “to knot or distort, to make crooked.” It is the wise man’s integrity that makes his path straight and the fool’s secret sin that makes his crooked. Being found out is the same as coming to ruin in the previous verse.

10 He who winks maliciously causes grief, and a chattering fool comes to ruin.

11 The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.

12 Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs.

13 Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment.

14 Wise men store up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.

Use of the mouth ties these verses together. Following the Septuagint, the RSV reads: “He who winks the eye causes trouble,” adding: “but he who boldly reproves makes peace.” The winking of the fool is the same kind of body language we encountered in Chapter Six, “A scoundrel and villain, who goes about with a corrupt mouth, who winks with his eye, signals with his feet and motions with his fingers, who plots evil with deceit in his heart — he always stirs up dissension.”¹ It conveys the secret language of a conspiracy. Body language often speaks louder than the mouth and frequently contradicts the words that are spoken. In v. 10 it is not an unconscious message that is conveyed but a gesture that wants to draw the other person into a conspiracy. The chattering fool here is the same as in v. 8, the one who refuses to obey the will of God. He is the person whose mouth says one thing but his body says something else.

That the speech of the righteous is “a fountain of life” reminds us of Jesus’ words: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him”; to which John adds: “By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”² The righteous have given the control of their mouths to the Holy Spirit who uses them to give the life-giving message to others. The violent overwhelming of the mouth of the wicked is the same expression as found in v. 6 and the same interpretation ought to be given to it.

1. Prov. 6:12-14

2. See John 7:38,39

V. 13 refers to the source of the speech of both species. The fools are driven by hatred, which is demonstrated in the discrepancy between what they say and what they mean. The righteous are motivated by love for their neighbors. Peter must have thought of this verse when he wrote: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”¹ James adds: “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”² The ultimate love that covers sin is, of course, the love of God, which, in the Old Testament, allowed human sin to be covered by the blood of a sacrificial animal and under the New Covenant, to be washed away with the blood of Christ. It is obvious that no “cover-up” is intended, as if sin would be allowed to fester underneath the camouflage of love. We cover up other people’s mistakes, not our own, because we love them and we remember our own frailty. In our dealing with our fellowmen, we emulate God’s love to them.

V. 13 also connects wisdom and love, inferring that these form a guarantee against punishment on the Day of Judgment. The verse goes from the front to the back, from the lips of the righteous to the back of the wicked who receives his forty-minus-one lashes for his foolishness. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The LXX combines the two members into one proposition, ‘He who puts forth wisdom with his lips is a rod to chastise the man without heart.’ ” The same thought is expressed in v. 14, where we read that wisdom becomes a surety for the future day. As Paul expresses in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians: “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”³

15 The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor.

16 The wages of the righteous bring them life, but the income of the wicked brings them punishment.

The question that forces itself upon us in these verses is “what kind of wealth is meant and what is the message conveyed?” *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “Below the surface there lies, it may be, a grave irony against the rich.” The commentary refers to a parallel verse that reads: “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall.”⁴ Solomon does not speak here about blessing or curse but simply about one of the facts of life. The wealth accumulated here is not of divine origin but it is acquired for the purpose of defense against divine and human interference in a person’s life. The rich man does not need God’s protection; he has his won. The author of Hebrew warns against this kind of attitude: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’ ”⁵ And James states: “The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.”⁶

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “The lesson is that one is not to blame poverty or wealth for the quality of one’s life. A man uses his possessions according to his character: as tools for good or ill.”

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1. I Peter 4:8
 2. James 5:19,20
 3. II Cor. 1:21,22
 4. Prov. 18:11
 5. Heb. 13:5,6
 6. James 1:9-11

The Hebrew word rendered “wages” is *pe`ullah*, which can mean “labor” or “reward.” We must look at these words in the light of Paul’s statement: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹ Solomon’s statement does not say that we can work our way to heaven by doing the right thing. He does say that we can work ourselves out of heaven and into hell by being corrupt. But he does not touch the truth that righteousness is imputed to us, that it is not our own, and that it reveals itself in doing what is right.

17 He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.

The profound truth expressed in this verse is that discipline is not something that only benefits us when we allow it to be applied to ourselves; it becomes a road sign, a testimony to others. The opposite is also true that refusing discipline sets a bad example. And people tend to follow bad examples more easily than good ones.

The Hebrew uses two different words for “discipline” and “correction,” but both words are quite similar in meaning. The first is *muwcar*, rendered “instruction for the purpose of restraint.” The second is *towkechah*, meaning “chastisement.” In the first chapter of this book *towkechah* is used three times in the sense of “reproof.”² We find *muwcar* four times in Chapter One.³

18 He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool.

19 When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.

20 The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value.

21 The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment.

The underlying truth that binds these verses together is the condition of the human heart and its relationship to the spoken word. The problem in v. 18 seems to be that it condemns lying rather than hatred. Yet, we know that both are sins. Eugene H. Petersen, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this verse: “Liars secretly hoard hatred; fools openly spread slander.” It is not only the concealing of hatred that is sinful but also adding the hypocrisy of presenting hatred as love in the way we talk to the person we dislike. It means aggravating one sin by adding another. The solution is to overcome hatred by love. Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”⁴ The hypocrite who harbors hatred and speaks love is called “a fool.” Revealing hatred by talking behind someone’s back is not any better.

V. 19 suggests that no one is so righteous that he can give free reign to his tongue. We cannot trust our own heart. The truth proclaimed by Jeremiah applies to all: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”⁵ James’ words about the difficulty to tame the tongue form a good commentary on this verse. We read: “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set

1. Rom. 6:23

2. See Prov. 1:23,25,30.

3. See Prov. 1:2,3,7,8.

4. Matt. 5:43-45

5. Jer. 17:9

on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”¹ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* embellishes this verse with a quotation from the Greek philosopher Xenocrates, who said: “I have been sometimes sorry that I spoke; I never have been sorry that I was silent” and with one from Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*: “We seldom return to silence without injury to conscience.”

The only human tongue that can be called “the tongue of the righteous” is the tongue of our Lord Jesus Christ. He did not need to bridle His tongue because there was no deceit in His heart. Even Jesus’ enemies had to admit: “No one ever spoke the way this man does.”² When Peter advises us to follow Christ’s example, he adds: “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”³ The reference to Christ’s suffering in our behalf suggests that it must be possible for us to control our tongue because of a renewal of our heart. And it is the condition of our heart that determines our value: “choice silver” or “little value.” The comparison of the tongue of the righteous with silver links it to the Word of God of which the Psalmist says: “And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.”⁴ This also forms the bridge between this verse and the next.

V. 21 defines the difference between the righteous and the fool by means of the influence exercised upon others. The righteous speak to others and provide nourishment for their soul. This can only mean that the words they speak are the Word of God. No human wisdom or insight can feed the spiritual and emotional need of mankind. The fool only speaks to himself and loses his way in the process.

22 The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.

A superficial glance at the first part of this verse would make us believe that there is some truth in the message of some preachers that God wants us to be rich. But the section part, which mentions the absence of trouble, seems to contradict this. In Paul’s doxology, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ”⁵ the blessings are spiritual and material riches has nothing to do with it. We can spiritualize the word “wealth” but then we must do the same to “trouble” and whether we do our not, trouble remains trouble or hardship. To preach that God’s blessing keeps trouble from our doorstep contradicts the experiences of daily life as well as the message of Scripture. Paul and Barnabas encouraged the disciples in Asia Minor with the words: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”⁶

The interesting Hebrew word in this verse is *’etseb*. The prime meaning is “an earthen vessel,” also “painful toil,” or “labor.” The same word is used in the verse “All *hard work* brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.”⁷ This leads to the conclusion that we cannot bring down the blessings of the Lord upon us by working up a sweat. Or as Eugene Peterson renders it in *Proverbs*, “God’s blessing makes life rich; nothing we do can improve on God.” The Psalmist concurs with this when he says: “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat — for he grants sleep to those he loves.”⁸ A footnote in the NIV

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1. James 3:2-8
 2. John 7:46
 3. See I Peter 2:21,22.
 4. Ps. 12:6
 5. Eph. 1:3
 6. Acts 14:23
 7. Prov. 14:23

adds: “for while they sleep he provides for...” As Derek Kidner mentions in *Proverbs*, this “affirms not that labor in itself is useless, but only labor unattended by the divine blessing.”

The ultimate application of this verse is to the salvation of our souls. In Paul’s words: “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”¹

23 A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct, but a man of understanding delights in wisdom.

24 What the wicked dreads will overtake him; what the righteous desire will be granted.

25 When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.

The Hebrew in v. 23 reads literally: “It is as sport to a fool to do mischief; but a man of wisdom has understanding.” As in the KJV, the word “sport” is used in the archaic sense of “pleasure.” The NIV legitimately provides the verb “delights” in order to keep the verse in balance. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The Revised Version expresses the meaning better: ‘And so is wisdom to a man of understanding;’ *i.e.* the wise man finds his refreshment in living a wise and prudent life, which is as easy and as pleasant to him as mischief is to the vicious. The wisdom intended is practical religion, the fear of God directing and showing itself in daily action.”

In the comparison between the fool and the righteous in these verses the words used to differentiate between them are “pleasure” and “delight,” “dread” and “desire,” “swept away” and “stand.” The Hebrew word to describe the pleasure of the fool is *sechowq*, meaning a laughter that is either in merriment or derision. V. 24 reveals that the derisive pleasure of the fool is a cover up for his inner fear. It is because the fool knows where his evil conduct will lead him that he adopts an attitude of mockery. Our conscience often warns us of the consequences of our acts. I assume that people who end up in hell will admit to themselves that they always knew where they were going. That is why people resort to sadism as a mask to cover their inner angst.

A starker contrast than between the dread of the wicked and the desire of the righteous in v. 24 can hardly be imagined. But there is a way in which God hounds us down with His righteousness in order to bring us to the place where we capitulate. Francis Thompson expresses this beautifully in the poem *The Hound of Heaven*:

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes, I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed,
followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
‘All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.’ ”

8. Ps. 127:2

1. Rom. 4:4,5

Once we surrender and allow ourselves to be caught, we will be covered by the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ and we begin to realize that the deepest desires of our souls are being met.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, quotes from C. S. Lewis' *The Weight of Glory* to illustrate the desire of the righteous. We read: "The desire of the righteous is also, ultimately, God; and 'they shall see his face.' 'In the end, that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression of the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.' "

That does not mean that we will be spared the storms of life. The hurricane will hit both the good and the evil. The difference is not in the measure of protection but in the foundation upon which lives are built. Jesus says: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."¹

26 As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him.

As we saw earlier, the Hebrew word rendered "sluggard" is *atsel*, which is only found in *The Book of Proverbs* and that fourteen times. This verse portrays the frustration of an employer who finds himself unable to get the work done because his employee is goofing off. This frustration is described vividly as the effect vinegar has on teeth, eating away the enamel, and as smoke that makes the tear ducts of the eyes work overtime. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, "The last clause is rendered by the LXX, 'So is iniquity to those who practice it.' "

If it is true that work that is done sloppily or too slowly is a source of frustration to the employer, how much more frustrating must it be to God when He sees that we are slow or sluggish to fulfill our responsibilities to Him. *The Book of Judges* chronicles Israel's failure to carry out the Lord's command to possess the land. In the first chapter alone we read: "The Benjamites, however, failed to dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the Benjamites. But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan or Taanach or Dor or Ibleam or Megiddo and their surrounding settlements, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land. Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them. Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron or Nahalol, who remained among them; but they did subject them to forced labor. Nor did Asher drive out those living in Acco or Sidon or Ahlab or Aczib or Helbah or Aphek or Rehob, and because of this the people of Asher lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. Neither did Naphtali drive out those living in Beth Shemesh or Beth Anath; but the Naphtalites too lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land, and those living in Beth Shemesh and Beth Anath became forced laborers for them. The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain. And the Amorites were determined also to hold out in Mount Heres, Aijalon and Shaalbim."²

Had the church of Jesus Christ been faithful in carrying out the great commission, this world would have been evangelized long ago.

27 The fear of the LORD adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short.

28 The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.

1. Matt. 7:24-27

2. See Judg. 1:21,27,29-35.

Although we know that, on earth, righteousness is not always rewarded with longevity, nor do the wicked always die prematurely, we understand what Solomon tries to say here. The fear of the Lord endows us with eternal life, which is a quality of life that will extend and be perfected beyond the boundaries of our earthly existence. The Apostle Paul equates this with hope. The difference between those who fear the Lord and the wicked lies in the fact that the hope of the righteous will be fulfilled and the expectations of the wicked will be disappointed. Happiness cannot always be expressed in the number of years we live. Some who die early have lived more fully than some who become centenarians.

We do not know what eternity is like or even how to describe it. Living in time, as we all do on earth, we can only think of it as endless time. Even if that concept may prove to be wrong, we will not be disappointed when we enter eternity. Entering eternity will mean entering into the joy of God, which will be more satisfying than anything we can imagine while on earth. The saddest thing I can imagine is to have lived on earth and end up having nothing.

29 The way of the LORD is a refuge for the righteous, but it is the ruin of those who do evil.

The KJV reads “The way of the LORD is strength to the upright” but the NIV’s rendering “refuge” better expresses the meaning of the Hebrew word *ma`owz*. It means “a fortified place.” In following “The way of the LORD” we experience protection against the onslaughts of evil that try to destroy us. If we want to be safe we must obey the will of God. Refusal to obey leads to ruin. It is obvious that righteousness consists in following the Lord. We cannot be called “righteous” if we follow our own way. The first act of obedience we can perform, that which will impute God’s righteousness upon us, is to put our trust in God’s Word. Jesus defined this righteousness when He said: “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”¹ The hidden irony of this verse is that “good” can ruin a person who is bent on avoiding it.

30 The righteous will never be uprooted, but the wicked will not remain in the land.

The statement about the wicked refers to the warnings God and Moses’ issued to the people before they entered Canaan: “Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out”² and “After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time — if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God and provoking him to anger, I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the LORD will drive you.”³

Solomon made this statement long before there was any question about an Assyrian or Babylonian captivity. When these occurred there were not enough righteous left in the Promised Land to keep the land from vomiting out its inhabitants. If ten righteous could have saved Sodom and Gomorrah, a small number of faithful could have avoided disaster in Canaan also. I do not know how many people will be needed to save this world, but we have the promise of Jesus that the meek will inherit the earth.⁴

31 The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out.

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1. John 6:29
 2. Lev. 20:22
 3. Deut. 4:25-27
 4. See Matt. 5:5.

32 *The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.*

Mouth, tongue and lips are figures of speech that are used frequently in *The Book of Proverbs*. They stand for more than spoken words; they sum up the fruit of a whole life. The Hebrew word *nuwb* rendered “bring forth” literally means “to germinate.” It has the added meaning of “to make cheerful.” We find the same word in the verse “They will still *bear fruit* in old age, they will stay fresh and green.”¹ Cutting out the perverse tongue, probably, refers to an ancient cruelty to those who had incurred punishment upon themselves. Without a tongue a person is no longer be able to speak. This is the equivalent of becoming speechless in embarrassment. We will ultimately be judged by our own words as the servant in *The Parable of the Talents* of whom the master said: “I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow?”² “Fitting” may be too mild a word to render the sparkle in the Hebrew word *ratsown*, which is derived from a word, meaning “delight.” This verse puts perversity in opposition to delight. The fruit from the tree of knowledge seemed good to eat, but the real tasty one is the fruit from the tree of life.

2. Chapter Eleven:

1 *The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight.*

2 *When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.*

3 *The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.*

4 *Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.*

These four verses are linked together by the concept of integrity. At the background lies the desire to be rich in order to be independent and wield power in life on earth and beyond. V. 11 depicts a businessman who thinks he can shortchange his customers without anybody knowing it. Weights used on a scale must conform to standards that are agreed upon by society. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: “The system of weights and measures in use among the Hebrews was derived from Babylonia and Egypt, especially from the former ... Weights were probably based by the ancients upon grains of wheat or barley, but the Egyptians and Babylonians early adopted a more scientific method. Sir Charles Warren thinks that they took the cubes of the measures of length and ascertained how many grains of barley corresponded to the quantity of water these cubes would contain.” The most common weights mentioned in the Bible are the shekel, gerah, mina, and the talent. It would go beyond the scope of this study to enter into the value of these weights and the way this was determined. Suffice to state that certain standards were set upon to which society as a whole had decided to adhere. Honesty and integrity demanded that a merchant used the accepted weight in selling his products. In ancient times some customers would carry their own weights when going to the market in order to verify whether the seller cheated or not. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this verse: “God hates cheating in the marketplace; he loves it when business is aboveboard.”

The important part of v. 1, however, is that God verifies our honesty or the lack of it. Dishonesty always flourishes when people think that God does not know what they are doing or is not interested in the details of their lives. God links honesty with our salvation by stating in the law: “Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt.”³ Having mentioned in

1. Ps. 92:14

2. Luke 19:22

3. Lev. 19:35,36

Governor Felix' court the hope of the resurrection from the dead, the Apostle Paul said: "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man."¹

V.2 does not seem to fit in with the lesson of the first verse, unless we remember that the purpose of dishonesty is working oneself up to a level where we become the envy of others. The Hebrew word *zadown*, rendered "pride" is derived from a word which means "to seethe." We find it in the verse: "Once when Jacob *was cooking* some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished."² The proud man is the short-fused person who explodes when he does not get his way. "Humility" is the translation of the Hebrew word *tsana*, which is only found in this verse in *The Book of Proverbs* and in Micah: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk *humbly* with your God."³ Eugene H. Petersen calls them "down-to-earth people." "The stuck-up fall flat on their faces but down-to-earth people stand firm."

To be humble or "down-to-earth" does not mean to be worthless, devoid of talent, or unintelligent. Only the real great can afford to be humble. It was Jesus' divinity that allowed Him to be made "gentle and humble in heart"⁴ and it was because He was "in very nature God" that He could make Himself nothing, humble Himself and become obedient to death on a cross."⁵ It is the humble people who are great and the ones who consider themselves great who are the despicable ones. Humble people can afford to be honest, faithful and incorruptible. Our greatness comes from God who clothes us with the righteousness and humility of Jesus Christ. That is the only qualification that will make us stand up on the Day of Judgment. It is the only currency that will count for the ransom of our soul.

5 The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way for them, but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness.

6 The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires.

Righteousness becomes a pilot on the path of life. Life consists of choices, which are determined by the one fundamental choice. We must all choose between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge.

The Hebrew reads literally: "The righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way." The Hebrew word *yashar* does convey the meaning of "being straight or even," but also of "pleasing." The word occurs in the verse: "Now Saul's daughter Michal was in love with David, and when they told Saul about it, he was pleased."⁶ The Septuagint renders this verse: "Righteousness cuts straight blameless paths, but ungodliness walks in iniquity." The Greek verb "cut straight" is the same Paul uses in "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who *correctly handles* the word of truth."⁷ The gist of the image used of walking on a path is that adhering to certain principles that are known to be in accordance with God's will keeps one from stumbling and falling. No path through life is smooth and straight; God's righteousness will keep us from slipping and falling on our faces. It is the unrighteousness of the wicked that leaves them unprotected and prone to become the victim of accidents.

V. 6 introduces outside influences that attack our integrity. The danger of temptation is that our sinful nature responds so easily to it. It was this realization that made Paul cry out: "What a wretched man I

1. Acts 24:16
2. Gen. 25:29
3. Micah 6:8
4. See Matt. 11:29
5. Phil. 2:6-8
6. I Sam. 18:20
7. II Tim. 2:15

am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”¹ God’s imputed righteousness may not keep us from being tempted but it can prevent us from falling. Those who are without that protection are the slaves of their own corruption. Sin is stronger than we are and without the power of the Holy Spirit no one will be able to resist or overcome it.

7 When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing.

8 The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead.

Solomon does not explain what the wicked man expected his power to do for in life beyond death. He probably expected life in eternity to be a continuation of life on earth, without any changes in the balance of power. He thought that the things money could buy for him here and now would be available at the same price on the other side. But Abraham said to the rich man in hell: “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.”² The good things the rich man enjoyed on earth turned out to be his worst things after he died. The difference between a wicked man’s hope and the hope of the righteous becomes clear when we look at what Paul expected after his death. He wrote: “We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”³

We can state that these two verses are linked together by death. We know that on earth the righteous are not spared trouble. It is not true that hardship and disaster only hit bad people and that the righteous live carefree lives. The opposite seems to be more often the case. Asaph writes in one of his Psalms: “I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”⁴ The righteous and unrighteous would deserve the same fate in eternity. The wicked pays for his own sins but the bill of the righteous is paid before he gets to the other side, and it appears that some of what he deserved is added to the wicked person’s account.

9 With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape.

10 When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.

11 Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.

12 A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue.

13 A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.

14 For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.

The Hebrew reads v.9 literally: “With his mouth a hypocrite destroys his neighbor but through knowledge the just shall be delivered.” The Hebrew word *chaneph* (hypocrite) is derived from a word that means “soiled.” Some Bible scholars prefer to render it “profane.” This is the only place it is found in *The Book of Proverbs*. The Septuagint reads: “In the mouth of the wicked is a snare for fellow citizens. Knowledge affords an easy path for the just.”

The comparison in this verse seems to be lopsided. Is it true that what the godless says harms not only himself but others also, but the righteous is the only one who benefits from his God-given wisdom? The parallel of Hebrew poetry requires a balance that seems to be lacking here. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*,

1. Rom. 7:24

2. Luke 16:25

3. Rom. 8:23-25

4. Ps. 73:3

suggests that the godless undermines true values with his slanderous talks and that the righteous saves himself from those consequences. He states: “The best defense is knowledge, at first hand, so that you bypass his distortions.” *Barnes’ Notes* offers the explanation: “By the knowledge of the just, shall they (i.e., the neighbors) be delivered.”

The next five verses continue the theme of v. 9 by extending the consequences of evil and righteous living beyond the sphere of personal life, to the community of the city and the whole nation. The theme culminates in the statement made in a later chapter “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.”¹ Such words sound irrelevant in our world of geopolitics. Apart from some Muslim countries, nations rarely make the connection between national interests and religion.

We know examples of towns that benefited from the personal achievements of one of their citizens. If, for example, a city boasts to have an Olympic gold medallist living in it, the city council will make sure to publicize the fact. Even some outstanding moral qualities have been exalted. In the south of the United States several streets carry the name of Martin Luther King and some have a Billy Graham Boulevard. The street names, however, glorify more the fame than the righteousness of the person. And in spite of Solomon’s statement that the city rejoices over the perishing of the wicked, notoriety also seems to bring reward to a place.

The message of this verse is that righteousness ought to exalt and sin is a disgrace, whether or not it is recognized as such. The righteousness of the godly may provide better safety for a place than city walls. Ten righteous would have saved Sodom and Gomorrah. But even of the place of God’s revelation on earth Jesus had to say: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you...”² The prosperity of the righteous suggests that commerce is carried out in an honest and above board manner. This also seems to contradict the very nature of commerce which is rather graphically exemplified in God’s condemnation of Babylon in Revelation.³

V.12 reads literally: “He that is void of wisdom despises his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his peace.” The Hebrew word, rendered “derides” is *buwz*, which means “to disrespect.” Solomon uses it eight times in *The Book of Proverbs*, the first time in the verse: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools *despise* wisdom and discipline.”⁴ Despising one’s neighbor is a direct violation of the command “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”⁵ The second part of v. 12 suggests that the neighbor may give cause for derision by his despicable behavior; otherwise the reaction of the man of understanding would not make sense either. The link between this verse and the command to love our neighbor as ourselves implies that there may be despicable traits in our own life that would offend others. The love that loves his neighbor as himself is, in Paul’s words, “not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”⁶ And Peter reminds us: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”⁷

The gossip of v.13 is called “a talebearer” in Hebrew. He is the person who cannot be trusted with confidential information. Since this verse is put in the context of the welfare of the city and the nation, we may assume that the secrets the talebearer betrays are points of national security. The nation is the chosen people that inhabit the Promised Land. Those who endanger their existence violate the Lord’s covenant.

1. See Prov. 14:34.
2. Matt. 23:37
3. See Rev. 18:11-13.
4. Prov. 1:7
5. Lev. 19:18
6. I Cor. 13:5
7. I Peter 4:8

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: “Other Old Testament references to the *talebearer* (apart from the indeterminate 20:19) portray him as malicious rather than indiscreet; he is an informer, out to hurt: see *e.g.* Leviticus 19:16; Ezekiel 22:9. This gives added point to the first line: *i.e.* he will deliberately betray you.” The reference in Leviticus reads: “Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the LORD.” And the text in Ezekiel says: “In you are slanderous men bent on shedding blood; in you are those who eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts.”

Although v.14 does not specifically recommend government by democracy, it does advocate that a head of state seek advice by a wide consensus of informed people. This is a recurring theme in *The Book of Proverbs*. We find it in the following verses: “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”¹ “Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance.”² And “For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers.”³ This does not mean that every decision must be made by majority vote, but it indicates that the most common way to find the will of God is by consulting people who know God in their personal lives.

15 He who puts up security for another will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe.

16 A kindhearted woman gains respect, but ruthless men gain only wealth.

17 A kind man benefits himself, but a cruel man brings trouble on himself.

18 The wicked man earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward.

19 The truly righteous man attains life, but he who pursues evil goes to his death.

20 The LORD detests men of perverse heart but he delights in those whose ways are blameless.

21 Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will go free.

When we put these two verses together we get a picture of ruthless men who try to enrich themselves by preying on others, particularly gullible females. Jesus said about the Pharisees of His time: “They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.”⁴ And the Apostle Paul warns Timothy against people who “having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires...”⁵ The Word of God wants us to come to grips with the fact that this world is full of people who use financial scams to enrich themselves, whether they be loan sharks, tele-evangelists, or other crooks. We must surrender ourselves and our possessions to the Lord and deal with what we have as belonging to Him. Jesus’ words to His disciples: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves”⁶ is good to remember when we keep our finances in order also.

This does not mean that we should never help anyone who is in need or accept help from fellow believers when we need it. When the Holy Spirit came upon the believers in the early church, He turned

1. Prov. 15:22

2. Prov. 20:18

3. Prov. 24:6

4. Mark 12:40

5. II Tim. 3:5,6

6. Matt. 10:16

them into one single family in which the members wholeheartedly sacrificed themselves for one another.¹ God wants us to gain respect in the way we handle our money, whether we be male or female.

Woe to those who enriched themselves at the expense of others. The books that will be opened on the Day of Judgment will not only be the records of our moral or immoral behavior but also the cashbooks and ledgers of our businesses and bank accounts.

We must put these verses in the context of the Bible as a whole to understand how the righteousness that is spoken of here is obtained. These verses do not teach that we become righteous by doing good. It is the righteousness with which God covers us that makes us produce acts of righteousness.

22 Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.

This is not the kind of Bible verse one would choose for a birthday card for a girlfriend. It is the only known instance in which the beauty and the beast are one and the same person. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this: "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful face on an empty head." Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states: "The proverb puts it more forcibly than we might. Where we (to whom the outward is the impressive part) would have spoken of the lady as a little disappointing, Scripture sees her as a monstrosity." Although the Hebrew obviously intends to make a comparison the words "as" and "is" are not found in the original text. *Young's Literal Translation* leaves it to us to compare; it reads: "A ring of gold in the nose of a sow -- A fair woman and stubborn of behavior."

The first observation to make is that female beauty is like a treasure comparable to a gold ring. Nose rings were pieces of jewelry in Old Testament times. Among the presents Abraham's servant gave to Rebecca was a gold nose ring.² Jewelry is intended to enhance existing beauty. The Hebrew word, translated "discretion" is *ta'am*, meaning "taste." It has the same double meaning as in English. We speak of the taste of food and of someone's "good taste" in other matters. In the former meaning it is used in the verse "The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and *tasted* like wafers made with honey."³ What is lacking in the woman wearing the gold nose ring in this picture is good taste, or intelligence. This girl would fit well in our modern "blond jokes."

In the background of this verse lies the truth that the most important beauty is inner beauty. Peter's apostolic advice to Christian women is: "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."⁴ Although this sounds like a prohibition to wearing jewelry, the real point is that a woman is only beautiful if she possesses both inner and outer beauty. Outward beauty can never be a substitute; it cannot be a cover for inner ugliness. A pig remains a pig whatever it wears. Putting a gold ring in its nose makes it more piggish.

23 The desire of the righteous ends only in good, but the hope of the wicked only in wrath.

24 One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.

25 A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

26 People curse the man who hoards grain, but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell.

27 He who seeks good finds goodwill, but evil comes to him who searches for it.

28 Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

29 He who brings trouble on his family will inherit only wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise.

1. See Acts 2:44,45; 4:32-36.

2. See Gen. 24:22.

3. Ex. 16:31

4. I Peter 3:3,4

30 The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.

31 If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner!

The righteous person in these verses has his focal point in eternity beyond the borders of life on earth. This is what determines his actions on earth. The wicked cannot see beyond the horizon, and, therefore, he believes that the here and now is all there is, and he acts accordingly. We have already drawn a line of comparison between the desire of the righteous and the hope of the wicked, and we have seen the difference in reward. We also know that the facts of life do not always bear out Solomon's conclusions that righteousness is profitable and crime does not pay. The writer of these verses can only be justified if we understand that the scope of his research goes beyond that which is temporal. The good that the righteous person desires and ultimately receives is his reward on the Day of Judgment. Likewise, the reward of the wicked will be the wrath of God.

The mention of the man who hoards grain paints a picture of times of war or famine in which the farmer or merchant takes advantage of a crisis by driving up his price. In Europe, two world wars gave birth to a generation of "new rich," people who made their money in "the black market" by holding back certain items and bypassing government regulations. John depicts the scene of the coming of the Antichrist in Revelation with these words: "When [the Lamb] had broken the third seal, I heard the third Living Being say, 'Come!' And I saw a black horse, with its rider holding a pair of balances in his hand. And a voice from among the four Living Beings said, 'A loaf of bread for \$20, or three pounds of barley flour, but there is no olive oil or wine.'"¹

Times of crisis reveal the content of the human soul more than times of ease and prosperity. Righteousness will show itself in compassion for human suffering. The surprise of the righteous will be to discover that the person in need he helped, was God Himself. We read in Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"²

God uses wars and famines to put us to the test. The English text renders v. 27 nicely with the use of the words "good" and "goodwill." The latter is the translation of the Hebrew word *ratsown*, meaning "delight." We find it in the verse about sacrifices: "If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be *acceptable* to the LORD."³

There is also a promise in these verses that generosity will not make one poor. Jesus promises: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."⁴ The warning contained in these verses is against putting one's trust in possessions. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives the clearest answer to this danger: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence,

1. Rev. 6:5,6 (*The Living Bible*)

2. Matt. 25:34-40

3. Lev. 1:3

4. Luke 6:38

‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’ ”¹ God is the only One who can protect us in this life and in the one to come.

The Hebrew of v. 25 reads literally: “The liberal soul shall be made fat and he that waters shall also be watered himself.” Our use of images has changed. We no longer take it as a compliment when people remark that we have gained weight. In Old Testament times, as in other continents of the world at present where hunger is a threat to people, getting fat is seen as a sign of prosperity and blessing. This verse emphasizes that generosity benefits the giver more than the recipient. As Derek Kidner remarks in *Proverbs* in connection with these verses: “The principle works itself out in the realm of relationships, character and destiny.” It is in blessing others that we are most blest ourselves. And nobody will eat less because he shares his food with others. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes comments on this verse by Chrysostom: “There are some Eastern proverbs on the stewardship of the rich. When a good man gets riches, it is like fruit falling into the midst of the village. The riches of the good are like water turned into a rice field. The good, like clouds, receive only to give away. The rivers themselves drink not their water; nor do the trees eat their own sweet fruit, and the clouds eat not the crops. The garment in which you clothe another will last longer than that in which you clothe yourself. Who gives alms sows one and reaps a thousand.”

One of the benefits of belonging to a wealthy family is that there will be an inheritance to divide when the head of the household passes away. V. 29 depicts the situation in which one of the members of such a family is cut out of the father’s will because of bad behavior. Not only does such a person lose everything he thought would come to him, but he may find himself to be like one of the servants of the family instead of a member. Jesus’ words about the slave and the son bring out the deeper meaning of this verse: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”²

A lot of evangelical truth is packed into v. 30: “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.” Evidently, Solomon was fond of the image of the tree of life, since he uses it four times in *The Book of Proverbs*.³ *The Revised Standard Version* reads: “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but lawlessness takes away lives.” The Hebrew, however, does not seem to give any basis for such an interpretation. The tree of life was found in paradise before man fell in sin and it turns up again in the New Jerusalem in heaven. Seen next to its counterpart, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it represented, evidently, the choice of obedience to the will of God. The fruit of a righteous life grows in the ground of obedience. Jesus used the image of the vine and the branches. He said: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”⁴ Our obedience to the will of God will draw others to choose the same kind of relationship with God that they see demonstrated in us.

The poetic parallel of v. 30 gives great depth to it. There is an obvious relationship between righteousness and eating the fruit of the tree of life. One does not become righteous without eating this fruit. The second part of the comparison equates soul winning with wisdom. But winning the souls of men for God is also the result of eating the fruit of that tree. Going back to the two trees in paradise we understand that Solomon contrasts wisdom with knowledge. Eating from the tree of knowledge does not make one wise; yet there cannot be any wisdom without knowledge. Knowledge by itself is limited to the head; wisdom is knowledge of the heart. He who eats from the tree of life does not feed himself alone.

V. 31 does not state that the righteous receives all his reward on earth. As a matter of fact, some Bible scholars interpret this negatively and read “his due” as a correction or punishment. Eugene H.

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1. Heb. 13:5,6
 2. John 8:34-36
 3. See Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4.
 4. John 15:5

Peterson, in *Proverbs*, renders this verse: “If good people barely make it, what’s in store for the bad!” There is, in fact, enough reason to take “his due” in a negative sense as a retribution for transgression. That is the reading of this verse in the Septuagint, which we find in Peter’s First Epistle: “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”¹

The Hebrew word, translated “his due” is *shalam*, meaning “to be safe” or “to be friendly.” We find it in the story of Joseph and his brothers in the verse “They had not gone far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, ‘Go after those men at once, and when you catch up with them, say to them, ‘Why have you repaid good with evil?’ ‘”² And in the Law of Moses in the verse “If a man uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit must *pay* for the loss; he must *pay* its owner, and the dead animal will be his.”³ But the negative use elsewhere does not mean that the word is consistently used in Scripture in that sense. There is a way in which righteous people are rewarded in this life, although they will not receive their crown of life until they have passed through death. Both righteousness and sin have their built-in recompense.

3. Chapter Twelve:

1 Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid.

The Hebrew word *muwcar*, translated “discipline” is probably the most important word in the whole Book of Proverbs. We find it used at least thirty times. Its literal meaning is “chastisement” or “restraint.” The word rendered “correction” *towkechah* is found approximately sixteen times in the book. Although the meaning of both words is similar there is a slight difference in emphasis. In modern English discipline is usually self-imposed but correction comes from an authority higher than ourselves. The opposing words in this verse are “knowledge” and “stupid.” We could render them “smart” and “dumb.” It is a sign of intelligence to put restraint upon oneself. The Apostle Paul explains: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”⁴ Only those who understand the reason for their existence will use this kind of discipline for the purpose of reaching their goal in life. There is no better illustration of the Christian life than the one Paul uses of athletic training.

The most interesting twist in v.1 is that discipline is linked to knowledge. It takes effort and training to acquire the knowledge that will lead to wisdom. There is no shortcut, as Eve found out. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Instruction; correction, discipline, which shows a man his faults, gives him a lowly opinion of himself, and opens his mind to receive *knowledge*, especially the knowledge of himself and of all moral obligations.”

2 A good man obtains favor from the LORD, but the LORD condemns a crafty man.

3 A man cannot be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted.

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1. I Peter 4:18
 2. Gen. 44:4
 3. Ex. 21:33,34
 4. I Cor. 9:24-27

V.2 seems to contradict Paul's quotation from the Psalms: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."¹ The Hebrew text does not have the word "man" in the beginning of the verse; it is supplied in the translation for the sake of balance. But it is obvious that "good" is not something abstract in which God delights; it is the demonstration of goodness in a person's life. Since the characteristic that God condemns is "craftiness" or "scheming" in the other person, we may conclude that the essence of goodness here is the opposite of craftiness. It is the simplicity of a pure soul that does not seek ways to circumvent the will of God. It is obvious that this purity can no longer be found naturally in us since the fall. If it exists it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As the Apostle Paul states: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."² Both goodness and self-control, the discipline of the previous verse, are the result of our fellowship with God, not the condition that makes us acceptable. The difference between the good and the crafty is in their surrender to the will of God.

V.3 draws a comparison with a tree, as does Psalm One. "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."³ It is our delight in the Word of God, as the Psalm suggests, that establishes us in life and provides us with a prominent place in human society. Making the Word of God the priority of our life will produce the fruit of goodness and self-discipline mentioned earlier. Neglect of God's Word produces acts of wickedness which robs life of its meaning. "Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away."⁴

4 A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.

Although the previous verses are applicable to both male and female, Solomon highlights for a moment the specific role a wife plays in society. A good wife provides dignity and honor for her husband, but a sinful woman infects her spouse with "spiritual osteoporosis."

Going back to the day of creation, we read: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."⁵ The image of God is expressed in male and female together. It is the unity of two individuals of opposite sex that makes "man" as God created them. Solomon may have written this verse or incorporated it in his collection of current popular sayings, living in a world that was male-dominated. It was after our first parents had sinned that God said to the woman: "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."⁶ In the perfect human, the bearer of God's image, the wife is the husband's crown and the husband is the wife's glory. The Apostle Paul, who has been accused of male chauvinism, writes: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁷

5 The plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful.

1. Rom. 3:10-12
2. Gal. 5:22,23
3. Ps. 1:3
4. Ps. 1:4
5. Gen. 1:27
6. Gen. 3:16
7. Gal. 3:26-28

6 The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the speech of the upright rescues them.
7 Wicked men are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous stands firm.
8 A man is praised according to his wisdom, but men with warped minds are despised.

These verses deal mainly with advice given. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, entitles v.5 “As the man, so the policy.” Kidner observes: “Moffatt puts it well: ‘The aims of a good man are honorable; the plans of a bad man are underhand.’ If this is a truism, it is one which is overlooked whenever leaders are elected on the strength of their promises rather than their principles.” It is the relationship with God that makes one righteous. Obedience to the will of God does not cancel out human initiative. God wants us to make plans in which we consult Him. As Solomon advised in an earlier chapter: “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”¹ The Hebrew word, translated “plans” is *machashabah*, which is often used in the derogatory sense of “schemes.” *Young’s Literal Translation* of v.5 reads: “The thoughts of the righteous [are] justice, the counsels of the wicked -- deceit.”

V.6 deals with words that lead to murder or rescue. To “lie in wait for blood” describes a lust to commit cold-blooded murder. This is not a matter of committing a crime of passion on the spur of the moment, killing someone without intending to do so; it is premeditated assassination. This is illustrated in the conspiracy of the Jews who wanted to assassinate the Apostle Paul. We read in Acts: “The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot.”² People who demonstrate this kind of attitude are under the power of demons. As Jesus said to His contemporaries: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.”³ In the same vein we can say that the Holy Spirit inspires those who try to save lives. V.6 suggests that the righteous are successful in their campaign and are able to render the evil intent of the wicked powerless.

V.7 depicts the lasting effect of righteousness as opposed to short-lived triumph of the wicked. Jesus’ words about the two houses built on different foundations are applicable here: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”⁴ The “house” in v.7 is more than the building in which we live. The Hebrew word *bayith* refers especially to family. We find it in the verse “The LORD then said to Noah, Go into the ark, you and your whole *family*, because I have found you righteous in this generation.”⁵

V.8 does not indicate who is the judge. If public opinion is meant, the statement is open for debate. Nothing is more volatile than public opinion poles. And wisdom does not rate very high in the mind of the masses. Approval ratings usually go up and down according to the measure of success a person’s acts seem to have. There is a lot of wisdom in ignoring the poles.

The Hebrew word translated “wisdom” is not the one that is normally used. *Sekel* refers to intelligence and to the successful application of it. It is the reputation gained from the use of wisdom. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “A man who gives practical proof of wisdom by life and character, whose

1. See Prov. 3:6.
2. Acts 23:12,13
3. John 8:44
4. Matt. 7:24-27
5. Gen. 7:1

words and actions show that he is actuated by high views, is praised and acknowledged by all ... Thus we read of David, that he behaved himself wisely, 'and he was acceptable in the sight of all the people' (1 Samuel 18:5).

"Warped minds" is the translation of the Hebrew "perverse heart." It is not the lack of logical thinking that is to blame but the nature of the beast. Eugene H. Peterson's paraphrase in *Proverbs*, "airheads are held in contempt" does not cover the point. Before throwing stones at others we do well to realize that this perversity is inherent to each of us unless we are rescued by God's grace. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."¹

9 Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food.

This verse emphasizes the human tendency to assume a role that one does not play, that is to be what one is not. The words "have a servant" can also be rendered "a servant to oneself." The latter rendering makes more sense. This verse deals with human relations; it uses evaluations established in a society that is concerned about the human pecking order; it warns against snobbery.

Eugene H. Peterson, in his paraphrase *Proverbs*, renders this: "Better to be ordinary and work for a living than act important and starve in the process." *The Revised Standard Version* reads: "Better is a man of humble standing who works for himself than one who plays the great man but lacks bread." And The Living Bible paraphrases: "It is better to get your hands dirty-and eat, than to be too proud to work-and starve."

According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, a snob is "one who seeks association with persons of higher social position and looks down on those considered inferior." There are no "nobodies" for God. It is our human mind that wrongly evaluates people. Jesus warns: "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?"² The only evaluation of our life that counts is the one God makes. To rank high in human society and low in God's eye ultimately means to be lost for eternity. David states in one of his Psalms: "Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar."

10 A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.

Martin Luther is credited with saying that if one is converted one's dog and cat should also know it. In our western pet-conscious society such words carry little weight, but in other cultures where animals are exploited and keeping of pets is unknown this verse is an important reminder. The Hebrew text reads literally: "A righteous man regards the life of his beast, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." The text probably speaks about livestock more than about pets, but the principle is the same. It is the recognition that we share the same Creator with our fellow-creatures of different species that determines our attitude toward them. God had good reason to include domestic animals in His command regarding the Sabbath.³

In commenting on this verse, Adam Clarke says: "I once in my travels met with the Hebrew of this clause on the sign board of a public inn: 'A righteous man considereth the life of his beast,' which, being very appropriate, reminded me that I should feed my horse." The main lesson of the verse, of course, is that if one is kind to animals one will be even more so to humans. God's concern for the animals He created shines through in Jesus' words: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't

1. Eph. 2:1-3

2. John 5:44

3. See Ex. 20:8-11.

be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”¹ These words reveal at the same time man’s greater worth over the animal world. The latter is as important to remember in a society in which people want to “save the whale” while at the same time allow babies to be aborted.

Such inconsistency in compassion, probably best describes the latter part of our verse. The tender mercies of campaigning for the preservation of certain species become cruelty if they are not balanced by a similar concern for fellow human beings.

11 He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.

12 The wicked desire the plunder of evil men, but the root of the righteous flourishes.

The same proverb is repeated in Chapter 28:19. The Hebrew text reads literally: “He that tills his land shall be satisfied with bread, but he that follows vain (persons/things) is void of understanding.” To understand the meaning of these words we have to go back to the day Adam and Eve changed the balance of nature by sinning against God. God said to Adam: “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”² The farmer recognizes the reality of the existence of in sin in “the sweat of his brow.” He knows that unless he works hard in plowing, sowing, weeding, and reaping he will be reduced to bankruptcy. Failure to recognize the reality of sin leads to chasing of fantasies. This is not only evident in the realm of agriculture, but in any philosophy that does not take sin into account. Jean Jacques Rousseau’s “Return to Nature” failed, because it did not recognize that nature fell when man fell. The systems of communism and capitalism fail for the same reason. We can only overcome the results of sin in this world if we recognize its existence.

V.12 reads literally: “The wicked desires the net of evil (men) but the root of the righteous yields fruit.” The reference to the growing process is the principle that ties these two verses together. Wickedness sets traps in the hope of living from the benefits of poaching. The RSV’s rendering of this verse differs considerably from the NIV. “The strong tower of the wicked comes to ruin, but the root of the righteous stands firm.” The problem is that the Hebrew word *matsowd* means both “a net,” “a tower” and “a bulwark.” The word is found twice in Ecclesiastes and the two verses use it with different meanings. “I find more bitter than death the woman who is a *snare*, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.”³ And: “There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge *siege works* against it.”⁴ Evidently, the prime meaning of the word suggests the capture of something. The thought that comes through in Hebrew is that the wicked person is snared by his own wickedness, whilst the righteous is firmly grounded and his righteousness produces growth.

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1. Matt. 10:28-31
 2. Gen. 3:17-19
 3. Eccl. 7:26
 4. Eccl. 9:14

13 An evil man is trapped by his sinful talk, but a righteous man escapes trouble.

14 From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him.

The thought of entrapment of the wicked is continued in v.13. The snare, which he plans to use on others, entraps him. The same thought is expressed in the proverb: “A fool’s mouth is his undoing, and his lips are a snare to his soul.”¹ *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The Septuagint here introduces a couplet not found in the Hebrew: ‘He who looks gently shall obtain mercy; but he who frequents the gates [or, ‘contends in the gates,] will harass souls.’ This seems to mean the man who is calm and considerate for others will himself be treated with pity and consideration (... Matthew 5:7); but he who is a gossip, or a busybody, or litigious, will be always vexing his neighbors.”

The text suggests that all speech is potentially dangerous; otherwise the escape of the righteous man would make no sense. We are reminded of James’ warning: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.”² David prayed: “Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.”³ Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases this verse: “The gossip of bad people gets them in trouble; the conversation of good people keeps them out of it.”

This is not the place to elaborate on the miracle of speech. But we do well to recognize that the fact that we produce sounds that have meaning is a gift of God that is beyond our comprehension. It is also an indication of how deeply man has fallen that the human tongue has become “a restless evil, full of deadly poison, set on fire by hell.”⁴

“The fruit of his lips” is a beautiful word picture. It suggests growth, beauty, and the capacity to satisfy others. Fruit begs to be eaten. The expression “to eat one’s words” usually pertains to saying the wrong thing. A tree is not supposed to eat its own fruit. A fruit is also a seed bearer. Originally, the Word had power of creation. As the Psalmist says: “Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”⁵ Some of this creative power is preserved in the expression “the fruit of his lips.” If our words can bear fruit we grow closer to God’s primary intent with human speech. As people created in God’s image, the closer we draw to the original the deeper will be our satisfaction. If the words of our mouth remain as does the work of our hands, we reach the fulfillment of Moses’ prayer: “May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us — yes, establish the work of our hands.”⁶ The picture Solomon had in mind was of a farmer who lived from the harvest of his own land. He was rewarded by the work of his own hands, which kept him alive as well as others.

15 The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.

The fool in this verse is described as someone who has such a high opinion of his own intelligence that he does not need any counsel from others. The maxim states: “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” The overestimation of oneself is the essence of foolishness. Derek Kidner, in his commentary *Proverbs*, heads this verse with “The man who is never wrong.” He states: “We show ourselves men of reason when

1. See Prov. 18:7.

2. James 3:1,2

3. Ps. 141:3

4. See James 3:6,8.

5. Ps. 33:8,9

6. Ps. 90:17

we *listen* (RSV) to reason, and test ourselves for prejudice. The person who always knows best may be the only one unconscious of his real name.”

This theme is replayed several times in *The Book of Proverbs* with small variations. Twice we read: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.¹ There is value in seeking the wisdom of others who have learned from their experience, but the ultimate counselor is God, as is clear from the Proverb: “All a man’s ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart.”² *The Living Bible* paraphrases this verse insightfully with: “We can justify our every deed, but God looks at our motives.”

It is foolish to act as if we have been here on earth before; we are all new at this. Most people have little or no idea where they are going in life. It is not until we discover from where we came and where we are going that we know what to do. Jesus gave us the supreme example on the eve of His crucifixion. We read in John’s Gospel: “Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.” In performing this simple act of humility, Jesus showed us the way in which He would lead us to glory.

16 A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.

TLB reads: “A fool is quick-tempered; a wise man stays cool when insulted,” and Eugene H. Peterson’s *Proverbs*: “Fools have short fuses and explode all too quickly; the prudent quietly shrug off insults.” The Hebrew word translated “insult” is *qalown*, which has the primary meaning of “shame.” As such it is primarily used in *The Book of Proverbs*. We find it in one of Asaph’s Psalms: “Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name, O LORD.”³ This verse deals with self-control, which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes a Hebrew proverb “which asserts that ‘a man’s character is accurately discerned by purse, by cup, by anger;’ *i.e.* by his conduct in money transactions, under the influence of wine, and in the excitement of anger.”

17 A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies.

18 Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

19 Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.

20 There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace.

These four verses speak of the relationship between honest speech and an honest heart. Shakespeare expresses this connection beautifully in *Hamlet*, when Polonius advises his son Laertes: “This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” Telling lies to others begins with telling lies to ourselves. Before Adam and Eve covered their bodies, they covered their hearts with a fig leaf. We can only be truthful if the Holy Spirit has given us a new heart.

Another lesson we learn from these verses is that words can hurt or heal hurts. This is true of spoken words as well as of written ones. A Dutch poet states: “The sharpest weapon known to man is the point of a sharp pen.” Truth has the propensity of healing if it is spoken in love. The Apostle Paul recognized this when he wrote that “speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”⁴ All words are basically swords. The evil sword is the sword that kills. God’s Word is a

1. Prov. 14:12; 16:25

2. Prov. 21:2

3. Ps. 83:16

sword that heals like the scalpel of a surgeon. As the author of Hebrews states: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”¹

The third lesson found is that truth is related to eternity. The lie, as Satan introduced it in God’s creation, is only a temporary interruption. Jesus emphasized the permanent character of truth when He said: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”²

Finally, the difference between truth and lie is the difference between war and peace. All wars are born of a lie. And the lie was born when Satan declared war on God. When God’s truth is revealed the joy of peace is experienced. It is with good reason that James tells us: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”³

21 No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble.

It seems that Scripture contradicts itself with this statement. The Psalmist Asaph states the opposite in one of his Psalms when he describes the arrogant as: “They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills,”⁴ implying that the righteous do have their share of trouble. The verb “befall” is the translation of the Hebrew *’anah*, which means “to happen” in various senses. We find it in the verse: “Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God *lets it happen*, he is to flee to a place I will designate.”⁵ *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “The mischief (*aven*) intended is not misfortune, calamity, but the evil consequences that follow on ill-doing (... Proverbs 22:8); from these the righteous are saved.” The verse has been translated in various ways. *Young’s Literal Translation* renders it: “No iniquity is desired by the righteous, and the wicked have been full of evil.” According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, The Vulgate reads, “Nothing that happens can make a just man sorrowful.” And the Septuagint, “The just man takes pleasure in naught that is unjust.”

The best illustration of this truth is found in Joseph’s words to his brothers who had sold him into slavery: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”⁶ The Apostle Paul shows how adversity fits into God’s plan for those who belong to Him. He writes: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”⁷

Looking at how the righteous handle adversity, emphasizes the effect it has upon those who are outside God’s plan of salvation.

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4. Eph. 4:15
 1. Heb. 4:12,13
 2. John 8:31,32, 34-37
 3. James 3:6
 4. Ps. 73:4,5
 5. Ex. 21:12-14
 6. Gen. 50:20
 7. Rom. 8:28-30

22 The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful.

In this verse Solomon returns to the theme dealt with in vv. 17-20. Here he places it in the light of eternity. We have seen what effect truth and lie have upon human society; here we see what God thinks of it. God's judgment is the most important factor, since He is the ultimate judge of all lives. As we saw above, the only way to become truthful is to be made truthful by the Holy Spirit. We can only become what God wants us to be if He makes us so. The key in this process is our surrender to His will, allowing God to do in us what He wants to do.

23 A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly.

The word "prudent" is an important word in *The Book of Proverbs*. The Hebrew word *`aruwm* is used eight times. It usually has a pejorative meaning of being "cunning" or "crafty," but it can also mean "subtle." It is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word *phronimos*, meaning "wise" or "discreet," which Jesus used in the phrase: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as *shrewd* as snakes and as innocent as doves."¹

The question is, of course, what kind of knowledge does this verse speak of. There is knowledge that would be sinful to withhold from others. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: "There is an extra punch in the final word. The simple contrast would lie between the ability and inability to keep quiet; but the fool gives *himself* away, as well as his secret." *The Matthew Henry's Commentary*, in connection with this verse, quotes the proverb: "The perfection of art is to conceal it." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comment on this verse: "If a fool hold his peace he may pass for a wise man.' I have known men of some learning, so intent on immediately informing a company how well cultivated their minds were, that they have passed either for insignificant pedants or stupid asses." Luke's Gospel states about Mary's reaction to the report of the shepherds who saw and heard the angels at Jesus' birth: "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."²

Speaking as a Dutchman I can say that the Dutch believe that if they do not say exactly what they think they are dishonest. This gives them the reputation of being blunt. A mark of a gracious conversation can be not to say exactly what one thinks. Peter advises: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."³ When Adam and Eve sinned they sought ways to cover the nakedness of their souls. God did not tear off their fig leaf to expose them but He replaced it by something more costly.⁴ The fool, as Derek Kidner indicates, exposes himself; the wise is prudent enough to hold back, knowing that he is not perfect enough to let the world know who he is.

24 Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor.

The Hebrew text reads literally: "The hand of the diligent shall bear rule: but the slothful shall be under tribute." A similar thought is expressed in an earlier chapter: "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth."⁵ Solomon had little good to say about laziness, as is evident from the verses:

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1. Matt. 10:16
 2. Luke 2:19
 3. I Peter 4:8
 4. Gen. 3:21
 5. Prov. 10:4

“The lazy man does not roast his game, but the diligent man prizes his possessions.”¹ And: “The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.”²

God created us in His image, which means that we are all endowed with some measure of creativity. The Hebrew word for “diligent” is *charuwts*, which has the meaning of gold being extracted from a goldmine. Diligence is precious because it refers to one of God’s attributes. That is what makes laziness so unnatural.

This verse is set against the background of human relations. There are some that work hard and rise to the top of the ladder, but others end up at the bottom because of their lack of initiative. We all know that this statement does not cover all facets of human society. Some float to the top without any effort of their own and others drown in spite of their struggles. Life is not all that fair. This verse only makes sense if we see it in the light of the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul put it in the right perspective when he said: “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”³ It is because Adam tried to reach equality with God by a shortcut that we all became slave laborers. Diligence that is related to the righteousness of Jesus Christ will propel us to the highest level in the universe, even to the point where we will share in the glory of God.

25 An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.

26 A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

The Hebrew reads literally: “Heaviness in the heart of man makes it stoop: but a good word makes it glad.” We all know anxiety, but we do not always recognize its evil source. The Apostle Paul advises: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”⁴ Jesus points out that anxiety stems from a lack of trust in God and He comforts us with the words: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”⁵

Worry has the propensity to choke the Word of God in us, as Jesus indicated in The Parable of the Sower. We read: “The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word,

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1. Prov. 12:27
 2. Prov. 26:15
 3. Rom. 5:17
 4. Phil. 4:6,7
 5. Matt. 6:25-34

but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.”¹ Peter advises: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”²

In the NIV’s reading of this verse, anxiety is already in the person’s soul but the kind word reaches him from outside. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, the Septuagint renders this verse: “A word of terror disturbs the heart of a (righteous) man, but a good message will gladden him.” The Septuagint’s reading makes the proverb more consistent. The Commentary continues: “Says a Serbian proverb, ‘Give me a comrade who will weep with me; one who will laugh I can easily find.’ ”

The point that ties these two verses together seems to be the sharing of emotions between friends. V.26 suggests that the baring of one’s soul can lead to painful consequences. The verse is rendered in various ways. *The Hebrew Interlinear Bible* reads: “The righteous is more excellent than his neighbor; but the way of the wicked seduces them.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this: “A good person survives misfortune, but a wicked life invites disaster.” Some Bible scholars believe that the vowels in the *tuwr* (excellent) should be changed to read “pasture.” Others believe that the meaning is “right counsel.” A footnote in the NIV reads as an alternate translation: “Or man is a guide to his neighbor.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The righteous is more excellent than his neighbor. This rendering has the authority of the Chaldee, and would signify that a good man is superior to others morally and socially, is more respected and stands higher, though his worldly position be inferior. But the clause is better translated, *The just man is a guide to his neighbor*, directs him in the right way; as the Syriac puts it, ‘gives good counsel to his friend.’ Septuagint, ‘The righteous wise man ... will be a friend to himself;’ Vulgate, ‘He who regards not loss for a friend’s sake is righteous,’ which is like Christ’s word, ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’ (... John 15:13). Hitzig, Delitzsch, and others, reading differently, translate, ‘A just man spies out (or, looks after) his pasture; *i.e.* he is not like the sinner, hampered and confined by the chain of evil habits and associations, but is free to follow the lead of virtue, and to go whither duty and his own best interests call him. This gives a very good sense, and makes a forcible antithesis with the succeeding clause.’ ”

27 The lazy man does not roast his game, but the diligent man prizes his possessions.

The text reads literally in Hebrew: “The slothful man roasts not that which he took hunting: but the substance of a diligent man is precious.” The Hebrew text, however, is full of pitfalls. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, explains: “The translation *roasteth* (AV, RV) is a guess, founded on Jewish tradition and on Arabic and Aramaic roots meaning to scorch. Another guess, based on another Arabic root, is ‘starteth not his quarry’ (the phrase *that which he took in hunting* (AV, RV) is in Heb. a single word). RSV, following LXX, uses the verb *catch*. In each case, whether as non-finisher or non-starter, the indolent man throws away his chances. The second line in AV (*but the substance of a diligent man is precious*) yields an excellent contrast, but it assumes that two Heb. words have changed places. (The Heb. as it stands reads: ‘but the substance of a precious man is diligent’.) This assumption by AV is as small and as rewarding as any that have been put forward for this unusual line. An alternative, which involves no alterations, is ‘But a rare treasure of a man is one who is diligent’ ... which is intelligible but inapposite.”

The only thing this discourse proves is that the original is difficult to translate and that the translations we possess are mostly based on guesswork. As is often the case, The Living Bible presents us with the most readable guess: “A lazy man won’t even dress the game he gets while hunting, but the diligent man makes good use of everything he finds.” The NIV admits in a footnote that the meaning of the verb “roast” is uncertain. Other readings of the verse are: “A slothful man will not catch his prey, but the diligent

1. Matt. 13:22

2. I Peter 5:7

man will get precious wealth.”¹ “The lazy man does not roast what he took in hunting, But diligence is man’s precious possession.”²

The lesson this verse teaches seems to be that laziness will keep a person from doing that which is natural and profitable even though it involves little effort. As we observed above, the word rendered “diligent” contains a reference to gold.³ Laziness and diligence can be seen as the equivalent of sin and righteousness.

28 In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality.

This verse expresses the main theme of *The Book of Proverbs*. We found the thought expressed earlier in “For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the LORD.”⁴ “For through me your days will be many, and years will be added to your life.”⁵ And: “The truly righteous man attains life, but he who pursues evil goes to his death.”⁶ These verses equate righteousness with wisdom. The Apostle John connects it to obedience when he says: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”⁷ And Paul puts it in perspective by indicating the source of wisdom and righteousness in the words: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”⁸

Wisdom, righteousness and obedience are all wrapped up in Jesus Christ and they are ours as we are in Christ. The Hebrew word, translated “immortality” is literally “no death.” Immortality means victory over death, which is obtained in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But again the Hebrew, especially of the last part of this proverb, is not as clear as one would like it to be. Hence, we find differing and sometimes contradictory readings. The Pulpit Commentary gives examples of the Septuagint and the Vulgate, of which we distill the following: The Septuagint reads: “the ways of the revengeful are not death.” The Vulgate renders it: “A devious path leads to death.” The Commentary concludes with the observation: “Many see in this verse a plain evidence that the writer believed in the immortality of the soul. We have reason to suppose that such was his faith, but it cannot be proved from this passage, though we may consider that he was guided to speak in terms to which later knowledge would affix a deeper interpretation.”

3. Chapter Thirteen:

13:1 A wise son heeds his father’s instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, put this verse under the heading: Teachability. He observes: “The pairing of a *son*, under training, with a *scorner*, who is a fool in the last stages of folly (*cf.* 26:12), suggests that if you cannot stand home truths from your own father you are well on the way to becoming

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1. RSV
 2. NKJV
 3. See Prov. 12:24.
 4. Prov. 8:35
 5. Prov. 9:11
 6. Prov. 11:19
 7. I John 2:17
 8. I Cor. 1:30

insufferable.” In the Hebrew the verb “heeds” is missing in the first part of the sentence. The suggestion seems to be that heeding discipline is so natural that no verb is needed. The natural tendency of a son is to look up to his father often up to a point of idolizing him. This inclination may change during adolescence and come back in a different, more mature form later in life, but, in a healthy and loving relationship, it will always be present as an undercurrent.

“Mocker” is the translation of the Hebrew word *luwts*, which we saw earlier, means literally “to make mouths at,” “to scoff.” It is the attitude Ham demonstrated when he saw his drunken father’s nakedness.¹ A boy, who pokes fun at his father, other than in a good-natured manner, puts himself out of the bond of parental love which is essential for his own spiritual and emotional development.

2 From the fruit of his lips a man enjoys good things, but the unfaithful have a craving for violence.

3 He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.

4 The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.

5 The righteous hate what is false, but the wicked bring shame and disgrace.

6 Righteousness guards the man of integrity, but wickedness overthrows the sinner.

The Hebrew text of v.2 reads literally: “A man shall eat good by the fruit of his mouth: but the soul of the transgressor shall eat violence.” The words suggest traffic going in opposite directions: by the good man it comes out, by the malefactor it goes in. This reminds us of Jesus’ words: “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”² The fruit of the lips must be understood as the speech of a righteous person. Fruit is meant to be eaten. If our heart is empty and dissatisfied, we will not be able to speak words of comfort and encouragement to others. We must first receive God’s blessing to become a blessing. The soul of the wicked, however, is empty. He not only has nothing positive to give, but he craves to harm others. The difference between the two is obviously a difference in source: one is fed from above, the other from below.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “By his kindly speech and wise counsels he shall gain the good will of his neighbors and the blessing of God. ... The word rendered ‘good’ (*tob*) means what is pleasant to taste and smell, while that translated ‘violence’ (*chamas*) signifies literally what is crude and unripe.”

V.3 seems to probe deeper into the heart of a righteous person. We saw in the previous verse that the lips are fed by what is in the heart. The good things in a good person’s heart produce the fruit of his lips. The fact, however, that even such a person needs a watch placed in front of his lips suggests that the heart may not be all that good. This fact corresponds with the reality we know. The righteousness we own positional before God does not automatically and instantaneously eradicate the root of sin in our heart. We must continuously face the reality that our sinful nature is still alive and operational, even though we count ourselves dead to sin. Luther is credited with the words: “We think we drowned the “old man,” but the beast can swim.” The wise man’s prayer is: “Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.”³ *The Pulpit Commentary* furnishes us with a bouquet of sayings in different languages that are worth copying. In Danish, “A silent man’s words are not brought into court;” in Spanish, “Let not the tongue say what the head shall pay for;” in Italian, “The sheep that bleats is strangled by the wolf;” and “Silence was never written down.”

The difference between the righteous and the unrighteous is not as radical as one tends to believe. Even if we have received forgiveness of sin and enjoy intimacy with God, we must remember that, but for

1. Gen. 9:20-22

2. Luke 6:45

3. Ps. 141:3

the grace of God, we are capable of committing the same crimes the wicked commit. The real difference between the good and the bad is that the good watch and pray so that they will not fall into temptation.

In v.2 the sinner craved violence, in v.4 he longs for satisfaction which eludes him. The fact that the evil person is called “sluggard” suggests that it takes an effort on our part to obtain satisfaction. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “The sluggard desires abundance, and does nothing more: he makes no diligent effort to effect his desire. When labor is laid aside, the desires are let loose; but they are restrained by doing work (cf. Prov 10:4).” It is true that God says: “Open wide your mouth and I will fill it”¹ but this is placed in the context of Israel’s journey from the slavery of Egypt to the realization of their dignity in Canaan. When they refused to obey God’s command to enter the Promised Land the offer also expired.

The desires of the righteous are always found within the limits of God’s will. The implication of righteousness is found in the bringing of our will and desires in alignment with God’s will and desires. It is only if we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness that all these things will be given to us as well.²

This thought is also expressed in vv.5 and 6. V.5 reads literally in Hebrew: “The righteous (man) hates a lie, but a wicked (man) is loathsome and comes to shame.” We cannot love the truth without hating the lie. Yet, it appears to be very difficult for any person to go through life without telling a single lie, whether “a white lie” or lies of any color. We are naturally so crooked that, as in a courtroom, we will only “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” if we honestly beg God for His help. The only person who never told a lie is Jesus Christ. He not only introduces His statements with “I tell you the truth...” (literally: “Amen, amen I say to you”)³ but He could honestly identify Himself with the truth: “I am the way and the truth and the life.”⁴ It is only inasmuch as we come to the Father by way of Jesus that truth will be restored to us and we will abhor a lie. Either we will abhor it or we will be abhorred ourselves. The angel who spoke to Daniel put it in the context of God’s final judgment when he said: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”⁵ C. S. Lewis, in speaking about *The Weight of Glory*, made the statement: “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.”

V.6 reads literally in the Hebrew text: “Righteousness keeps (the) upright in the way: but wickedness overthrows the sinner.” The Hebrew word translated “to overthrow” is *calaph*, which means “to subvert.” Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases this verse vividly with: “A God-loyal life keeps you on track; sin dumps the wicked in the ditch.” The picture is that of a narrow path that leads to life, which Jesus depicted when He said: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”⁶

As we saw in connection with v.3 of this chapter, without divine protection even the righteous will fall. As people of integrity we live in enemy territory. The enemy usually works by subversion; he infiltrates the soul and destroys from the inside out. Unless we recognize this and continuously call upon the Lord for His protection we will stumble and fall.

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1. See Ps. 81:10.
 2. See Matt. 6:33.
 3. We find the formula at least 25 times in John’s Gospel.
 4. John 14:6
 5. Dan. 12:2
 6. Matt. 7:13,14

7 One man pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.
8 A man's riches may ransom his life, but a poor man hears no threat.

The key thought is expressed in the second verse. These two verses remind us that we live in a world in which dog eats dog. There is no reference to divine protection in these verses. Man fends for himself and his behavior is governed by fear. The leading thought is that if one keeps a low profile, there is less of a chance to become a target. The picture is of a person who is taken hostage and who has to fork up money to save his life. We see this ungodly fear illustrated in Abraham's lie about Sarah not being his wife but his sister. As he went to Egypt, "he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' ' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.'"¹ Faith in God's promise had completely faded from Abraham's heart, and he became only bent on self-preservation to the point that he was willing to sacrifice his wife's honor.

These verses reveal the opposite side of the coin of wealth. On the one there is the thought that money means power and independence. The other side shows the risk of becoming a target for the greedy. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "The proverb in both members teaches one not to trust to appearances. Septuagint, 'There are who enrich themselves, having nothing; and there are who humble themselves amid much wealth.' It is obvious that such a version lends itself to a Christian interpretation. The first clause reminds one of the rich fool who laid up treasure for himself, and was not rich toward God (... Luke 12:21; comp. ... Revelation 3:17,18). The second clause teaches that wealth expended in God's service makes a man rich in the treasury of heaven (... Luke 12:21,33). One who thus uses the means entrusted to him could be spoken of like St. Paul, 'as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things' (... 2 Corinthians 6:10)."

It seems that the rich who pretend to be poor carry the day in these verses. But we ought not neglect to look at the one who fakes power without having the means to back it up. Both are pretenders and by consequence they both live a lie. Both suffer from a feeling of inferiority. The poor pretender knows that society would not accept him if they knew who he is; the rich pretender believes he would be unduly taken advantage of. Neither bank on the Lord's evaluation which says that a man's soul is worth more than all the riches of the world.

9 The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out.

The Hebrew reads literally: "The light of the righteous rejoices: but the lamp of the wicked shall be put out." The Hebrew verb *samach* is usually rendered "to rejoice." But *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that it should be read "to burn joyfully" in the context of this verse. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "Light and lamp in both cases may signify posterity. The righteous shall have a joyous posterity; but that of the wicked shall be cut off. So 1 Kings 11:36: 'And unto his son will I give one tribe, that David my servant may have a light ... always before me.' 15:4: 'Nevertheless for David's sake did the Lord give them a lamp, to set up his son after him.'"

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "This is a true light, kindled in his heart by God, different from the lamp (*ner*) of the wicked, which is devised and lighted by themselves, and has no element of permanence, but soon shall be put out." Quoting a certain Dr. Geikie, the *Commentary* continues: "There may be here an allusion to a common custom in the East. 'No house, however poor is left without a light burning in it all night; the housewife rising betimes to secure its continuance by replenishing the lamp with oil. If a lamp goes out, it is a fatal omen.' " The difference between righteousness and wickedness is depicted as the contrast of light and darkness. After all, when the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out it leaves

1. See Gen. 12:11-13 ff.

him in the dark. The light of the righteous is an inner light that cannot be put out by outward circumstances; the darkness of the wicked is the darkness of his soul. Jesus confirmed this when He said: “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”¹

10 Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.

The Hebrew text reads: “Only by pride comes contention: but with the well-advised is wisdom.” Pride demonstrates itself here in the refusal to accept advice. Contention must then be seen as the result of this refusal. As we saw earlier, the Hebrew word *zadown*, rendered “pride” is derived from a word which means “to seethe.”² The first part of this verse suggests that pride governs the whole picture, both he who gives advice and he who refuses it suffers from it. The second part can hardly be interpreted to mean that we ought to accept every piece of advice that carnal people offer us. The Living Bible paraphrases this verse: “Pride leads to arguments; be humble, take advice, and become wise.” Maybe Eugene H. Peterson’s paraphrase in *Proverbs* is more acceptable: “Arrogant know-it-alls stir up discord, but wise men and women listen to each other’s counsel.” In an earlier chapter, Solomon equated wisdom with humility. We read: “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.”³

Pride is the original sin. We read in Ezekiel’s prophecy the words that are usually taken as pertaining to Satan: “Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor.”⁴ It is no sin to be beautiful. What constitutes sin is the thought that beauty is self-made instead of a gift of God. When Satan failed to recognize God as the source of his beauty he became a fallen angel. In the same vein, humility is not a denial of talents and achievements, but recognition of the source. The Apostle Paul was humble when he wrote: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”⁵ Only the great can be humble!

The pride in our text consists in the presumption that one is wise enough in oneself so that no advice by others is needed. One who is truly knowledgeable will admit that the amount of what he does not know is infinitely larger than of what he knows. As far as a quarrel is concerned, it takes two carnal natures to clash.

11 Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow.

This is the translation of the Hebrew: “Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished: but he that gathers by labor shall increase.” The problem word is the Hebrew word *hebel*, meaning “emptiness” or “vanity.” It is the key word in Ecclesiastes: “ ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ ” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Literally, *wealth by a breath*; i.e. wealth obtained without labor and exertion, or by illegitimate and dishonest means, is soon dissipated, is not blessed by God, and has no stability. Vulgate, ‘riches acquired hastily;’ Septuagint, ‘substance gotten hastily with iniquity.’ This makes the antithesis more marked, the contrast being between wealth gotten hastily and that acquired by diligent labor ... ‘Quickly won, quickly gone.’ ” The alternate readings make more sense. *Barnes’ Notes* observes about “By vanity”: “literally, ‘by a breath,’ i.e., by a windfall, or sudden

1. Matt. 6:22,23
2. See note on 11:2.
3. See Prov. 11:2.
4. Ezek. 28:17
5. I Cor. 15:10

stroke of fortune, not by honest labor. The general meaning seems to be that the mere possession of riches is as nothing; they come and go, but the power to gain by skill of hand ('labor') is everything."

The underlying thought seems to be that the purpose of fortune is often misunderstood. When God gives abundance of material possessions, by whatever way that may be, the owner rarely asks for God's reason. People play in a lottery or gamble or participate in TV shows in order to acquire wealth. God is usually not consulted in such efforts. The text seems to suggest that God does not use windfalls, but that His plan is that we work hard and honestly with what He has provided for us in order to build it up.

Even if sudden riches would befall us, it is important to realize that God remains the original owner. All we have is borrowed and has to be returned. Windfalls tend to make us forget the principle and breed irresponsible spending. Eugene Peterson, in *Proverbs*, catches the point very well with: "Easy come, easy go, but steady diligence pays off."

12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

The Hebrew verb *mashak*, rendered "deferred" only occurs in this verse in Proverbs. It has a great variety of applications, the most important one being "to draw out." The verse seems to suggest that hope and patience are incompatible. This may be the warning Solomon wants us to receive. We tend to be impatient in regard to the fulfillment of God's promises. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states: "It is a help to recognize (and so guard against the natural reaction to) the slow maturing of God's harvest (Jas. 5:7)."

The Apostle Peter warns against this impatience that can lead to unbelief. We read: "First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.' But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."¹

Paul, on the other hand, seems to say that the patience is the essence of hope. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."² Paul identifies the hope of a Christian as "the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."³

This hope, however, does not seem to be the theme of this verse in Proverbs. Solomon speaks about the psychological effect seeming postponement or cancellation of things hoped for may have upon a person. One of the best illustrations is in the report of the two men going to Emmaus, who said to Jesus: "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place."⁴ That story also illustrates how fulfillment of hope becomes "a tree of life." This is the third of four times Solomon mentions the "tree of life" in his book.⁵

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1. II Peter 3:3-9
 2. Rom. 8:22-25
 3. Titus 2:13
 4. Luke 24:21
 5. The other references are Prov. 3:18; 11:30 and 15:4.

Solomon does not identify the object of hope. The disappointment of hope seems to point to a broken promise or an un-reached goal in a world of human relationships. The “tree of life” however speaks of something God promises. Eating its fruit leads to a life of fellowship and intimacy with God, which is eternal and fully satisfying.

13 He who scorns instruction will pay for it, but he who respects a command is rewarded.

14 The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death.

15 Good understanding wins favor, but the way of the unfaithful is hard.

16 Every prudent man acts out of knowledge, but a fool exposes his folly.

17 A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing.

V.13 puts two pairs of words in opposite categories: scorns – respects and pay – reward. The two that are in harmony with each other and form the core of the verse are instruction and command. The Hebrew seems to refer particularly to the Word and command of God. The literal Hebrew text reads: “Whoso despises the word shall be destroyed: but he that fears the commandment shall be rewarded.” The fact that “word” and “command” are given as parallel in this verse suggests that more is involved than advice on a human level. Most Bible scholars agree that the Word is here the Word of God which demands our obedience. The text has come to us in various readings that make it difficult to trace the original. *The Vulgate*, for instance, reads: “He who disparages anything binds himself for the future.” *The Septuagint*: “He who despises a thing (or a command) shall be despised by it.” God’s Word demands obedience. If in military service disobedience of a direct order has dire consequence and under certain circumstances can lead to death, how much more disobedience to the Word of God! The text goes beyond mere disobedience. “Scorn” is more than disobedience. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “scorn” as “an emotion involving both anger and disgust.” The verb “to scorn” is defined as “to hold in contempt.”

A person who is cited for contempt of court pays for it by serving time in prison. To show contempt for God by ignoring and reviling His Word has eternal consequences. The author of Hebrews catches well the meaning of this verse when he states: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”¹

For most of us the Word of God we know is the written Word. To treat the Bible with contempt is a dangerous enterprise. The only acceptable way to read the Bible is with a preset determination to obey what it tells us.

The reward of obedience is not elaborated in this verse. Jesus answered the woman who called out to Him: “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you,” “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”² God will repay our obedience with an eternal dividend that goes beyond our comprehension.

“The teaching of the wise” in v.14 actually reads in the Hebrew text: “The law of the wise.” It may be the “Torah” they teach to others, but their teaching would have little effect if they had not personally pledged obedience to the law.

1. Heb. 10:26-31

2. See Luke 11:27,28.

The world through which we must pass is described as a place filled with snares of death. A snare is meant to catch and kill and the means used is bait. The whole is the epitome of deception. Bait looks like something that is edible and enjoyable; in reality it is a means to kill. The Word of God reveals the true character of bait and serves as a guide to avoid snares and pitfalls. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: “The phrase *law of the wise* (man) (AV, RV) indicates that *law* (*tôrâ*) is here used in its original sense of ‘direction’ or ‘instruction’ ... it is the voice of spiritual experience rather than divine command, though it will be in harmony with *the Torah* (as its proximity to verse 13 emphasizes).”

Although “fountain of life” is not placed in the same context as “tree of life” in v.12, there is an obvious parallel. There is “hope” in the teaching of the wise. As we go through the minefields of life on earth the Word of God shows us how to avoid being blown to pieces. It gives us the hope of escape and of safe arrival. Jude tells us that God “is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy.”¹ A fountain of life does more than give us hope; as the tree of life feeds our hope, so the fountain of life quenches our thirst for fellowship with God. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?”²

“Good understanding” refers to the way the instruction or teaching in the previous verses is received. It refers not only to comprehension but also to application of what is learned. Luke’s Gospel illustrates what is meant here when it concludes the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus seeking knowledge about His Father with the words: “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”³ Obedience to the Word of God will help us to mature and gain the respect of our fellowmen and even of God.

There is more in the description of the way of the unfaithful than being difficult. The Hebrew word ‘*eythan* has a suggestion of something that has not been altered or does not change. In *The Book of Deuteronomy* is used to describe “a valley that has not been plowed or planted.”⁴ In the context of v.15 it may mean that there is no change of mind, not conversion and renewal of life. Some Bible scholars believe that ‘*eythan* is a copying mistake and should read ‘*êdâm*, “destruction.” *The Pulpit Commentary* gives the reading of the Vulgate: “In the way of scorners is an abyss,” and of the Septuagint as: “The ways of scorners end in destruction.”

The word rendered “prudent” is the Hebrew word ‘*aruw*, which we encountered before and which has the meaning of “subtle” in *The Book of Proverbs*. “Knowledge,” *da`ath* in Hebrew, is more than information stored in the head. It is the awareness that demonstrates itself in cunning. We find it in the theme of *The Book of Proverbs* in the opening verses that state that Solomon’s purpose in writing was “for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young...”⁵ We could call it one of the keywords of the book since it occurs at least 39 times in it. The word is found for the first time in Scripture in the mention of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The suggestion of this verse, therefore, is that the wise man has something to hide and he succeeds in doing so, whilst the fool who lacks this cunning exposes that which embarrasses. When God clothed Adam and Eve, He merely covered that of which they were ashamed. Wise or fool, we all need the coverage of the blood of the Lamb.

Where v.16 exposes character, v.17 deals with communication in a rather wide sense of the word. This verse would make a good poster in a newspaper office. It is a fitting memento for journalists. Sören Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher-theologian, had no love lost for journalists. He said that if a son or

1. Jude 24
2. Ps. 42:1,2
3. Luke 2:52
4. See Deut. 21:4.
5. Prov. 1:4

daughter of his would have entered into prostitution, he would have hope for recovery, but if they became journalists, he would give up hope. According to Solomon the purpose of reporting is to bring healing. It requires no second look to see that newspaper or television reporters do not have healing in mind in the breaking news they serve up piping hot. The idea that we live in a broken society is far from most people's mind. In the realm of advertising compassion is not only lacking but its absence is manipulated for the purpose of selling the product. If the wicked messenger needs healing himself but falls in trouble, the messenger who promotes healing will experience healing himself.

If we can apply this verse to secular communications, how much more is it relevant to the preaching of the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ! In Paul's words: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."¹

18 He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored.

The implication of this verse is again that our fallen condition needs close attention. Wisdom does not grow in perfect soil. It begins with the recognition that there is a need for redemption and for constant vigilance to keep the right course. The best illustration of the principle is found in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son.² The difference between the story and reality is that there is not always a happy ending. Not everyone who comes to poverty and shame comes to his senses either, as did the boy in the parable.

We must not miss the hidden treasure in the tail end of this verse. First of all, one who *heeds* correction realizes that he *needs* correction. That such recognition ends in being honored comes as a surprise, as it did for the prodigal for whom the fatted calf was killed. Most importantly, it is God who does the honoring.

19 A longing fulfilled is sweet to the soul, but fools detest turning from evil.

This verse shows the other side of the coin that was displayed in v.12. Instead of hope deferred we see the effect fulfilled longing has upon the soul. We cannot grasp the full meaning of the text without looking at the second part. The fulfilled longing, the ultimate satisfaction of our whole being is incompatible with the practice of evil. The image of God within us will make it impossible for us to experience real happiness while living in sin. Since only fools practice sin, the fulfilled longing belongs to the wise. Only the wise will be longing for that which fully satisfies: intimacy with God.

20 He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.

It has been my personal experience that my friendships changed after my conversion. Having no longer any common interests with those who did not know God made drifting away from them unavoidable. Getting to know people who shared my newfound joy, created a bond of intimacy I had never had with anyone else.

There must be some element of wisdom in us to make us decide to walk with the wise. Although this is physically impossible, we do well to walk with those who are ahead of us. We need the stimulus of fellowship with those who are wiser than we are in order to grow spiritually. In keeping company with fools we come to a dead-end. *Walking* in the counsel of the wicked will make us *stand* in the way of sinners and

1. II Cor. 5:20,21

2. See Luke 15:11-32.

finally *sit* in the seat of mockers.¹ Sin is the equivalent of stagnation. The Apostle Paul warns us: “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’”²

There is a play on words in the Hebrew text that is inevitably lost in translation. The Hebrew word for “companion” is *ra`ah* and for “suffer harm” *ruwa`*.

21 Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous.

22 A good man leaves an inheritance for his children’s children, but a sinner’s wealth is stored up for the righteous.

23 A poor man’s field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away.

The fruit of righteous living and the pay of unrighteousness is the theme that ties these three verses together. “Misfortune” seems to be a poor choice of words for the translation of the Hebrew word *ra`*, “bad or evil.” *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “misfortune” as “bad luck,” which suggests that no divine control over circumstances is involved. If “bad luck” is what plagues the sinners, the reward of the righteous would be “good luck,” a circumstance controlled by impersonal fate. The Living Bible paraphrases the verse: “Curses chase sinners, while blessings chase the righteous!”

The Bible seems to contradict itself on this point. Some verses depict the unrighteous as more prosperous than the righteous. Asaph, for instance, complained about “the prosperity of the wicked.” We read in one of his psalms “I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.”³ But then he realized that a wrong perspective influenced his judgment. From the viewpoint of time it seems that at least some crime pays, but the light of eternity paints a different picture. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “Sinners suffer not only the natural consequences of crime in external evil, injury to body, estate, reputation, etc. (... Psalm 11:6), but also stings of conscience and remorse; even seeming prosperity is often a chastisement, and long impunity is only augmenting the coming retribution. As the shadow attends the substance, so guilt is attached to sin, and brings with it punishment.” Psalm 11:6 reads: “On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot.” We must also remember that in the Old Testament things of eternity are often represented in terms of material blessing.

If it were not for the second part of v.22, we would tend to spiritualize these words and say that what the grandchildren receive is a spiritual inheritance. But the fact that the righteous will ultimately receive the wealth of the sinners obviously speaks of material goods. As we have seen before, the Old Testament believers equated spiritual blessing with material prosperity.

The Law of Moses knew the principle of the Year of Jubilee, which was celebrated every fifty years and in which all property was restored to its original owner. The law stated: “The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property.”⁴ *The Easton’s Bible Dictionary* states about the Year of Jubilee: “The advantages of this institution were manifold. 1. It would prevent the accumulation of land on the part of a few to the detriment of the community at large. 2. It would render it impossible for any one to be born to absolute poverty, since every one had his hereditary land. 3. It would preclude those inequalities which are produced by extremes of riches and poverty, and which make one man domineer over another. 4. It would

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1. See Ps. 1:1.
 2. I Cor. 15:33
 3. See Ps. 73:3-5.
 4. Lev. 25:11-13

utterly do away with slavery. 5. It would afford a fresh opportunity to those who were reduced by adverse circumstances to begin again their career of industry in the patrimony which they had temporarily forfeited. 6. It would periodically rectify the disorders which crept into the state in the course of time, preclude the division of the people into nobles and plebeians, and preserve the theocracy inviolate.”

The underlying principle was that God is the primary owner of the land, not the Israelites. That is why God said: “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.”¹ We do not know if the Israelites ever celebrated the Year of Jubilee. No record of such a celebration exists, but absence of proof does not prove anything. The fact that the land was never given its Sabbath’s rest was one of the factors that brought Israel into captivity.²

Even if it is not our experience that all the righteous become rich and the sinners poor, we must acknowledge that God blesses those who recognize Him as the original owner of all material wealth. We may not have a clear vision of how our dealings on earth have a bearing upon our status in heaven, but there will be equalization in the afterlife. As Abraham replied to the rich man who suffered in hell: “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.”³ We may not be sure about how God will handle things in heaven in connection with what we did on earth, but we understand that we will receive our new responsibilities in accordance with how we carried them out on earth. In concluding the Parable of the Crooked Manager, Jesus said: “So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?”⁴

Even if our grandchildren do not receive much when we pass away, if they inherit the righteous principles that governed our behavior, they acquire something that is precious. Those who follow Jesus’ advice: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”⁵ leave behind a blessing that cannot be bought with money.

Jesus elaborated the principle expressed in the second part of v.22 in the Parable of the Talents. The master said about the lazy slave who had not invested the master’s money: “Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”⁶ Even though, as we saw, righteousness cannot be equated with “green power” it is obvious that righteousness is demonstrated in the practical things of life. The recognition that God is the actual owner of all we possess and that we have to give account to Him for what we do with it, will give us the advantage over those who treat what they own as their own. That this may not always be visible during our life on earth does not make it invalid.

V.23 paints us a picture of an earthly reality we easily recognize. The Hebrew text is more complicated than the NIV’s rendering. We read: “Much food is in the tillage of the poor: but there is that is destroyed for want of justice.” The Living Bible reads: “A poor man’s farm may have good soil, but injustice robs him of its riches.” The text is rather difficult to explain. According to *The Pulpit Commentary* the word “tillage” means that the ground is worked for the first time. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, gives this

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1. Lev. 25:23
 2. See II Chron. 36:21.
 3. Luke 16:25
 4. Luke 16:11,12
 5. Matt. 6:19-21
 6. Matt. 25:28,29

verse the heading “Method matters most.” He states: “The point of this very terse proverb seems to be that the size of your resources matters less than the judgment with which you handle them.”

The question is whether this verse must be seen as a continuation of the previous one. Where v.22 speaks about God’s ultimate justice, exemplified in the taking away of the talent from the lazy slave and giving it to the most industrious one in Jesus’ parable, this verse illustrates the reason for the judgment of the wicked. The gist of the verse seems to be that injustice may prevent some people from utilizing their potentials to the full. Although “the poor” is not equated with the righteous in this verse, the sequence seems to justify the equation. Life is not fair! James cries out against this injustice. In his epistle he comforts the victims of social injustice by exhorting them not to abandon hope that the coming of the Lord will right the wrongs they are suffering. Life may not be fair, but the Lord is and it is important that we keep our hope fixed on Him instead of wasting our time with useless grumbling and public demonstrations.¹

24 He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.

25 The righteous eat to their hearts’ content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry.

Although these two verses do not seem to be connected at first glance, we will treat them as belonging together for reasons explained below.

In modern western society corporal punishment is declared anathema. Mushrooming of cases of child abuse account for this shift in public opinion. The Bible does not condone child abuse, but it recommends spanking as an effective means of teaching a young child. God wants us to associate physical pain with evil in childhood in order to train us to make the right moral choices as we grow up. It is obvious that there is a difference between spanking and abuse. It is at this point that public opinion goes astray. As is always the case with public opinion the pendulum swings from one extreme to the other and I foresee a time where the rod will be introduced anew and spanking will be regarded as appropriate.

The difference is not in the means of discipline but in the motivation. Real love hurts. We live in a fallen world in which sin festers below the surface and only a scalpel brings healing. To abstain from using the scalpel because of the pain involved amounts to pronouncing a death sentence. The text states that true loves demonstrates itself in not withholding pain. The interesting Hebrew word in the sentence is *shachar*, which refers to “dawn,” or “early.” The earlier discipline is applied in a child’s life, the more effective it will be. Once a pattern of wrong choices is established it may be impossible to reverse.

The Epistle to the Hebrews puts the principle in a wider perspective, first of all by stating that the Father used discipline in the life of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is to that discipline that we owe our salvation. We read: “Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.”² In another place the author of Hebrews states that God’s discipline of us is proof of His love for us. We read: “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”³

1. See James 5:1-11

2. Heb. 5:8,9 (NKJV)

3. Heb. 12:5-11

The need for discipline and correction lies in the fact that we are all born with a sinful nature. True discipline acknowledges this fact, and it recognizes the hope that something can be done about it. A lack of discipline will kill the voice of conscience that whispers to us the difference between right and wrong. The discipline of a father will only be effective if the father knows self-discipline. To make our children do what we are unwilling to do ourselves will eventually make us hypocrites in their eyes. Real discipline, therefore, begins with self-discipline.

Finally, discipline without love amounts to abuse. If discipline is only applied to prove one's authority, it will miss the mark. That is why the Apostle Paul advises: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."¹ The Greek word rendered "exasperate" is *parorgizo*, which means literally "to make angry." Discipline without love will plant the seeds of anger in the heart of a child, which will cause it to grow up as an angry adult, a person who will find himself unable to give love or accept it.

This brings us to the last verse in this chapter. It is obvious that the eating in v.25 does not refer to merely filling one's stomach, although that is the primary meaning of the words. The Hebrew text reads literally: "The righteous eats to the satisfaction of his soul: but the belly of the wicket shall want." The Hebrew word *soba`* means "satisfaction." This is best expressed in the Psalm that uses the same word: "You have made known to me the path of life; you will *fill me* with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."² The verse thrives on contrasts: righteous is the opposite of wicked, soul as over against stomach, and satisfaction instead of want. It is the discipline in the previous verse that will lead to the joy of living. The un-pruned tree will grow wild and will be unproductive.

Before Adam fell into sin, there was no distinction between the feeding of the body and the feeding of the soul. To live "by bread alone" was unknown. Jesus restored the harmony in the institution of the Lord's Supper. Since sin entered the world, we can eat and drink and remain inwardly empty. In the new creation, it will be possible to have an empty stomach and yet to be spiritually fulfilled. At present we have come to the point where eating and drinking are often considered unspiritual activities. This has never been God's intention.

4. Chapter Fourteen

1 The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.

2 He whose walk is upright fears the LORD, but he whose ways are devious despises him.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, may have taken some liberties in rendering this verse: "Lady Wisdom builds a lovely home; Sir Fool comes along and tears it down brick by brick," but this paraphrase renders well the contrast between the two extremes of wisdom and folly, even carrying it to the opposition of gender. Some Bible scholars believe that the Hebrew word *chakhmoth*, "wise," should be "pointed" differently and read *chokhmoth*, "wisdom." There is an obvious connection between this verse and the opening verse of the section in Chapter Nine: "Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars..."³ But in this verse the light falls on the homebuilder more than on the invitation. It is wisdom, that is fear of the Lord, taking His presence seriously, that makes a house into a home. It is rarely a woman who builds the house; most builders are men. A woman typically demonstrates her gifts in decorating a place, by giving it character and warmth. A good family-home consists of strong walls of male protection and feminine warmth. In the tribal area in Indonesia in which my wife and I worked as missionaries, the man

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1. Eph. 6:4
 2. Ps. 16:11
 3. Prov. 9:1 etc.

built the hut and the woman kept the fire going. Failure to recognize the presence of the Lord will be the breakdown of the family, brick by brick by the hands of those who live in the house. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes a Serbian proverb that states: “The husband should labor, the wife should save.”

V.2, ignoring the gender difference, shows us how effective homebuilding is done. Fear of the Lord, recognizing Him for what He is, will result in right living in the fullest sense of the word. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states: “The ‘despising’ may be unconscious, but none the less real. Every departure from God’s path is a pitting of one’s will, and a backing of one’s judgment, against His; but the contempt which it spells is too irrational to acknowledge.” James elaborates the truth expressed here, that faith that does not express itself in holy living is dead. He writes: “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” And “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”¹ It is obvious that, as in the case of discipline, the building of a home in which faith is lived begins with the leading of a life of personal holiness.

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, *The Septuagint* has a different reading: “He that walks in crooked ways shall be dishonored.” And *The Vulgate* gives quite a different turn to the sentence: “He who walks in the right way and fears the Lord is despised by him who pursues the path of shame.”

3 A fool’s talk brings a rod to his back, but the lips of the wise protect them.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride: but the lips of the wise shall preserve them.” The Hebrew word, rendered “rod” is *choter*. Bible scholars are uncertain about its meaning. Some believe it to mean “a twig.” The word is only found in the Bible in this verse and in Isaiah: “A *shoot* will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”² The Living Bible treats the verse more kindly with: “A rebel’s foolish talk should prick his own pride! But the wise man’s speech is respected.” And Eugene H. Peterson’s *Proverbs* is even gentler: “Frivolous talk provokes a derisive smile; wise speech evokes nothing but respect.”

Not many people receive beatings because of what they say. But Jesus’ words may be taken as a commentary on this verse: “I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”³ Sin has devaluated nothing as severely as the spoken word. In the mouth of God the Word was the means by which everything was created. It was the Word of God that became flesh in Jesus Christ. In human use the word has lost all of its original power and much of its meaning. According to James our own tongue has become our worst enemy.⁴ Wisdom, that is the fear of God, will tame the tongue and protect us against ourselves. We all need to pray David’s prayer: “Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.”⁵

4 Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest.

The Geneva Notes comments: “By the ox is meant labor, and by the crib the barn, meaning, without labor there is no profit.” It is interesting to consult various commentators on this verse. Most of them concentrate on the second part about the usefulness of the ox. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* sings the

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1. See James 2:17, 26
 2. Isa. 11:1
 3. Matt. 12:36,37
 4. See James 3:1-12.
 5. Ps. 141:3

praises of oxen in a comparison between the ox and the horse. To which we could answer with Paul: “It is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’ Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he?”¹ Paul does not mean that God does not care for oxen. In the Sabbath command for instance the Lord included the cattle,² which means the ox. The agricultural figure in this chapter would be out of context if it would be more than a mere illustration. In our present day where the machine has replaced the ox, the verse would have no meaning if only taken literally. The point Solomon wants to make is obviously that we must get our hands dirty if we want to see results in whatever the endeavor may be.

The Hebrew text reads: “Where are no oxen, the crib is clean: but much increase is in the strength of the ox.” The Hebrew word *bar* can mean “empty,” but it is also found in verses like: “The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is *pure*, enlightening the eyes.”³ It is that meaning of the word that made Derek Kidner write in *Proverbs*: “Orderliness can reach the point of sterility. This proverb is not a plea for slovenliness, physical or moral, but for the readiness to accept upheaval, and a mess to clear up, as the price of growth. It has many applications to personal, institutional and spiritual life, and could well be inscribed in the minute-books of religious bodies, to foster a farmer’s outlook, rather than a curator’s.”

5 A truthful witness does not deceive, but a false witness pours out lies.

6 The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none, but knowledge comes easily to the discerning.

7 Stay away from a foolish man, for you will not find knowledge on his lips.

8 The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.

9 Fools mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright.

V.5 repeats the truth that was expounded in earlier chapters,⁴ but in the context of the whole section truth is connected to wisdom, knowledge, prudence and restoration. Pilate’s question: “What is truth?”⁵ is not easily answered. David called God: “God of truth.”⁶ In variance with that statement, Jesus calls Satan “the father of lies.”⁷ This suggests that truth and lie are not primarily different ways to report certain facts but statements of character. When Jesus told His disciples: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”⁸ He indicated that truth is a Person and that our experience of truth is realized in our fellowship with the Father. This means that our version of facts will be governed by our relationship with God. A truthful witness is a person who looks at life in the light of God.

We have seen that wisdom is found in the fear of the Lord, that knowledge comes from eating from the tree of life, and that eternal life consists in knowing God. As Jesus said: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”⁹

Jesus calls us to be witnesses in a world that is dying because it lives a lie. Our witness to the message of salvation consists in not only telling the story but also in living the truth. Our life, that is our

1. I Cor. 9:9,10
2. See Ex. 20:10.
3. Ps. 19:8 (KJV)
4. See Prov. 6:19; 12:17.
5. John 18:38
6. See Ps. 31:5.
7. John 8:44
8. John 14:6
9. John 17:3

eternal existence, will depend on whose side we are. Since we are all born in a world that is polluted and we have all inherited a sinful nature, making amends for sin, that is repenting and making restoration, is not only necessary to enter the gate of life, it will also give us the testimony for the truth we are supposed to proclaim.

V.5 reads literally in Hebrew: “A faithful witness will not lie: but a false witness will utter lies.” The word “faithful” emphasizes a relationship.

The Hebrew word *biyn* in v.6, “understanding” may be the most important word in *The Book of Proverbs*; it occurs more than thirty times in the book. It has the added shade of meaning of separating mentally, or the ability to look at things with an analytical mind. It is the condition that eludes the mocker or scorner, the one who lacks wisdom because of his lack of the fear of God. Eugene H. Peterson in *Proverbs* paraphrases the verse: “Cynics look high and low for wisdom—and never find it; the open-minded find it right on their doorstep!” Whether “open-minded” covers the concept is open for discussion.

There is in v.7 a suggestion that foolishness may be contagious. The discernment or understanding mentioned in v.6 is related to spiritual maturity which is never acquired instantaneously. We all need growth in our fellowship with God to come to the point where we find wisdom on our doorstep. The author of Hebrew reproaches his readers’ this lack of maturity: “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”¹

The Hebrew text of v.8 reads: “The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way: but the folly of fools is deceit.” “Understand” is the same Hebrew word *biyn* that we saw above. The NIV renders it: “give thought to.” Part of wisdom is the understanding of our way through life. Fellowship with God will make us aware of where we are and where we are going because we know from where we came. John describes Jesus’ wisdom on the eve of His crucifixion: “Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.”² It was this awareness that made Jesus wash His disciples’ feet as a symbolic expression of His act of ultimate surrender in His death on the cross. Our understanding of the path of life may not be as precise and complete as Jesus’ but we ought to know enough not to float aimlessly on life’s billows.

V.9 reads literally: “Fools make a mock at sin: but among the righteous there is favor.” In order to understand the verse correctly we must know that the Hebrew word *’asham*, rendered “sin” also means “a sin offering.” This accounts for the NIV’s rendering “making amends for sin.” The verse could be read either as fools not taking their sins seriously enough to bring a sacrifice or that the sacrifice mocks them for their lack of real repentance. The righteous, however, experience *ratsown*, God’s delight or favor because atonement for their sins was made. The righteous are not sinless but forgiven. We find the same word *ratsown* in the verse: “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be *pleasing* in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”³

10 Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, gives a different twist to this verse with the rendering: “The person who shuns the bitter moments of friends will be an outsider at their celebrations.” The Hebrew reads: “The heart knows its own bitterness; and with his joys a stranger does not intermeddle.”

1. Heb. 5:11-14
2. John 13:1,3
3. Ps. 19:14

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “Neither our joys nor our sorrows can be wholly shared with another; no person stands in such intimate relation to us, or can put himself so entirely in our place, as to feel that which we feel. There is many a dark spot, many a grief, of which our best friend knows nothing; the skeleton is locked in the cupboard, and no one has the key but ourselves. But we can turn with confidence to the God-Man, Jesus, who knows our frame, who wept human tears, and bore our sorrows, and was in all points tempted like as we are, and who has taken his human experience with him into heaven.” The Commentary correctly points out that there is an exception to the rule in the fact that God in Jesus Christ not only understands us and our experiences but that He goes through them with us. The Epistle to the Hebrews stresses this fact: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”¹ In one of his books in *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Magician’s Nephew*, C. S. Lewis gives a beautiful illustration of God’s compassion and of the fact that His experience of our sorrow is even greater than our own. A young boy, Digory, finds himself in Narnia shortly after Aslan, the great lion, created it. The boy committed a wrong by giving in to his curiosity which released a wicked witch. The lion wants him to undo the wrong. Digory’s mother is in our world, dying on a sickbed. We read: “[Digory] had had for a second some wild idea of saying ‘I’ll try to help you if you’ll promise to help about my Mother’, but he realized in time that the Lion was not at all the sort of person one could try to make bargains with. But when he had said ‘Yes,’ he thought of his Mother, and he thought of the great hopes he had had, and how they were all dying away, and a lump came in his throat and tears in his eyes, and he blurted out: ‘But please, please – won’t you – can’t you give me something that will cure Mother?’ Up till then he had been looking at the Lion’s great front feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion’s eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory’s own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself. ‘My son, my son,’ said Aslan, ‘I know. Grief is great. Only you and I in this land know that yet. Let us be good to one another.’ ”

V.10 mentions not only grief but also joy that cannot be shared. The saying goes: “Company in distress makes sorrow less.” The fact that we feel unable to share either gives us a sense of isolation that cuts joy in half and doubles sorrow. It is loneliness, the inability to share, that makes life bitter. In this respect also, Jesus experienced our trouble. When Jesus entered Gethsemane to accept the cup the Father was giving Him, He wanted three of His disciples to be there with Him to support Him. He told them: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”² But they fell asleep. Satan uses our sense of isolation very effectively. He whispers to us that we are alone in bearing the burden and that no one, not even God, really cares. Only the Holy Spirit can make us “Rejoice with those who rejoice; [and] mourn with those who mourn.”³ The very fact that we become part of Christ’s body when we repent of our sins gives us the ability to break through our own isolation and that of others. Paul states: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”⁴ Heaven will be heaven because we will all share in the same joy.

One of the reasons why God allows sorrow to invade our lives is so that we can share the comfort He gives us with others. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus

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1. Heb. 4:15,16
 2. Matt. 26:38
 3. Rom. 12:15
 4. I Cor. 12:26

Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”¹

11 The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, turns the images around: “Lives of careless wrongdoing are tumbledown shacks; holy living builds soaring cathedrals.” Actually, the house of the wicked is, according to the meaning of the Hebrew word *bayith*, the stronger building. It stands for a solid construction. We find the word in the verse in Haggai where God reproaches the people that they neglect the rebuilding of the temple because they are too busy with building their own mansions: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”² The Hebrew word *ohel*, however, simply means “a tent.” *Bayith* can also mean “family” as in “The House of Orange” or “The House of Windsor.” The latter meaning may be the one intended here. Eternal life in the Jewish mind was expressed symbolically in the continuation of a person’s name through the existence of future generations. A person who was the head of a family tree was a person remembered. There are elements of status and importance attached to the concept. If “tent” is also looked upon as representative for a family, it means a group of low and unimportant people who do not exercise any influence upon the way this world is run. In Paul’s words: “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.” But it is of those the Apostle says: “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”³ *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* comments: “Sin is the ruin of great families.”

The verse may express a difference in vision and perspective as well. Those who build mansions on earth give expression to their conviction that life on earth is what counts because that is all there is. There may not have been any atheists in the Old Testament but there were many who lived like them. The righteous, however, understood that life on earth is like living in a tent. They were ready to move on to the next place of residence. Paul expresses this in his writings: “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.”⁴

12 There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

We find the same proverb twice in this book.⁵ Jesus may have thought of this verse when He said: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”⁶ As in English, the Hebrew word *yashar* has the double meaning of “straight” in the physical sense of the word, or “morally right.” It can also mean “convenient.” We find it in the words the Babylonian commander spoke to the prophet Jeremiah after the destruction of Jerusalem: “Today I am freeing you from the chains on your wrists. Come with me to Babylon, if you like, and I will look after you; but if you do not want to, then don’t come. Look, the whole country lies before you; go *wherever you please*.”

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1. II Cor. 1:3,4
 2. See Hag. 1:4
 3. I Cor. 1:26-29
 4. II Cor. 5:1
 5. See Prov. 16:25.
 6. Matt. 7:13,14

The road that seems right may be the convenient way, the “broad way” in Jesus’ admonition; it may also be the seemingly right thing to do. We may enter upon a certain path in good faith, yet without consulting the Lord. It is against this that Solomon warned earlier when he said: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”¹

13 Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief.

The NIV’s “may ache” and “may end” make the statement more plausible than the rigid KJV’s “Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.” The New Living Translation has the most likely interpretation: “Laughter can conceal a heavy heart; when the laughter ends, the grief remains.” Laughter is one of the miracles God inserted in human life. The fact that certain joyful emotions can make our face muscles contract, our eyes sparkle and our diaphragm shake is inexplicable. And it is typically human; no animal behavior can fully imitate this. But we do not always use the gift of laughter to express joy or amusement. Laughter can also be used as a mask. “Yours truly” knows this tendency from personal experience. Some emotions are too painful to be put into the full light of the day, so we keep them inside and cover them up with laughter. Solomon must have known this, otherwise he could not have written this proverb.

Laughter can take on various forms. It can be a tool of mockery or disdain. God knows when we laugh and He knows our reasons. When He announced to Abraham the coming birth of Isaac, Sarah laughed in ridicule. But when Isaac was born, he was called *Yitzhak*, “laughter.” Actually God gave him that name.² Thus Isaac became the embodiment of the fulfillment of God’s promise. The laughter in this verse is obviously an expression of joy or pleasure.

The Pulpit Commentary makes the following profound observation: “The text is scarcely to be taken as universally true, but either as specially applicable to those mentioned in the preceding verse, or as teaching that the outward mirth often cloaks hidden sorrow ... it has in it no element of endurance, and when it is past, the real grief that it masked comes into prominence. In this mortal life also joy and sorrow are strangely intermingled; sorrow follows closely on the steps of joy; as someone somewhere says, ‘The sweetest waters at length find their way to the sea, and are embittered there.’ ” The French philosopher Pascal saw in this the ultimate proof of man’s fallen condition. God is a God of joy and the fact that we can use joy as a cover-up for sadness is indeed an indication of our corruption. David’s testimony must be the banner of our life: “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”³ He also acknowledged God as the source of all joy when he called Him: “God, my joy and my delight.”⁴

14 The faithless will be fully repaid for their ways, and the good man rewarded for his.

15 A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.

16 A wise man fears the LORD and shuns evil, but a fool is hotheaded and reckless.

17 A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated.

18 The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge.

19 Evil men will bow down in the presence of the good, and the wicked at the gates of the righteous.

1. Prov. 3:5,6

2. See Gen. 18:10-15; 21:1-3.

3. Ps. 16:11

4. Ps. 43:4

These six verses have in common the theme of reward. They illustrate Paul's statement: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹

The Hebrew word rendered "the faithless" in v.14 is *cuwg*, which means literally "to flinch," or "to go back." The KJV uses the word "backslider." Peter's description of that kind of person is fitting here: "A dog returns to its vomit."² The picture comes to mind of the Israelites in the desert who wanted to return to Egypt, the land of their slavery; we read: "The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost — also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'"³ "Faithless" is indeed the true word if taken in its literal sense. It is a lack of faith about what God is doing in our lives and misunderstanding of the way He does it, that tends to make us give in to our circumstances and give up on God's promises. Faith is the most important element in perseverance. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews admonishes his readers: "We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised."⁴

Young's Literal Translation of this verses reads: "From his ways is the backslider in heart filled, and a good man -- from his fruits." Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, describes this verse as a "Table for one." If we leave the path on which God leads us, we are thrown back upon ourselves and eat the fruit of our own making. If we feed upon what is in our own unregenerate heart we face a depth of corruption. Jesus said about the human heart: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."⁵ But those who have received a new heart from God will eat the fruit of the Spirit, which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."⁶

The faith of the "simple man" in v.15 is, obviously, not the same kind of faith that the backslider abandoned in the previous verse. The *pethiy*, "simple man," as we saw earlier, is the person "without moral direction and inclined to evil." The lack of a personal relationship with God makes him an easy prey of demons and humans. Lack of faith in God brings him to confide in those who are unworthy of trust. The prudent, however, the *aruwm*, is the mature person who, in the words of Hebrews, "by constant use [has] trained [himself] to distinguish good from evil."⁷

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "The credulous fool believes all that he hears without proof or examination; having no fixed principles of his own, he is at the mercy of any adviser, and is easily led astray ... It is often remarked how credulous are unbelievers in supernaturalism. They who refuse to credit the most assured facts of Christ's history will pin their faith on some philosophical theory or insufficiently supported opinion, and will bluster and contend in maintenance of a notion today which tomorrow will prove untenable and absurd. Many who despise the miraculous teaching of the Bible accept the follies and frauds of spiritualism."

The difference between the gullible and the prudent is not only in their trusting or distrusting but also in their understanding of the purpose of life. "The steps" of the prudent are directed toward the specific goal of meeting God. Asaph testified: "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And

1. Rom. 6:23
2. II Peter 2:22
3. Num. 11:4-6
4. Heb. 6:11,12
5. Matt. 15:19
6. Gal. 5:22,23
7. Heb. 5:14

earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”¹ Understanding what the goal of life is will not only determine the direction in which we travel, but also the manner of our traveling.

This truth is also expressed in vv.16 and 17. The NIV calls the fool “hot headed.” The Hebrew states that he is “soon angry,” meaning he is short-fused. The slightest hurdle will make him blow up. One of the most difficult lessons to learn in life is that God not only allows hardship in our lives but that He puts in them in in order to test us. We read that Paul and Barnabas encouraged and strengthened the disciples’ faith by telling them: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”² If we lose our temper because of the obstacles God places in our way, we obviously do not understand His purpose for our lives.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states about this cluster of verses: “There are different ways of being a fool. We may be (a) gullible (15), taking on hearsay what we should verify for ourselves; (b) over-confident (16), like Peter before Gethsemane, or Amaziah with Joash (2 Ch.25:17ff.), playing with fire; (c) irascible (17a), acting on the state of our feelings, not the merits of the case: *cf.* verse 29, which emphasizes that to see a situation calmly is to see it clearly.”

The “crafty man” in v.17 is the person who uses schemes to reach his goal. The Hebrew word *mezimmah* refers to a plan that can be either good or evil. In this verse it is obviously used in the pejorative sense, but in the introduction of Proverbs we find it used positively: “for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and *discretion* to the young...”

In v.18, “the simple,” *pethiy*, are compared to the *’aruwm*, “the subtle.” That word can also be used in a negative sense as in: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.”³ But subtlety can also be exercised by the spiritually minded. Jesus told His disciples: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”⁴

The fact that folly is said to be inherited points in the direction of our sinful nature. We will all be fools unless the Lord gives us a new heart through conversion and regeneration. But knowledge, the divine wisdom that grows in intimacy with God, is acquired throughout the whole course of life and will ultimately become the means by which we can worship God. We read in Revelation what crowns are for: “The twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’”⁵

V.19 suggests that some of the glory given to God will reflect on us and that evil men will recognize us as good. If we lay our crowns before God’s throne, human beings will place their signs of recognition at our feet also. The scene depicted here will probably not be fully realized on earth. There are some illustrations of this in Scripture as in the story of Joseph. We read: “So when Joseph’s brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. Then he remembered his dreams.”⁶ The ultimate realization will be when Jesus Christ returns to earth “and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.”⁷ Paul had this in mind when he wrote to the Philippians: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and

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1. Ps. 73:23-26
 2. Acts 14:22
 3. Gen. 3:1
 4. Matt. 10:16
 5. Rev. 4:11
 6. Gen. 42:6b, 9a
 7. See Rev. 1:7.

every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”¹ Paul indicates that this revelation of Jesus upon His return will also occur in us and through us. To the Thessalonians he wrote: “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.”²

20 The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends.

21 He who despises his neighbor sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.

V.20 states the fact and v.21 issues the warning. In judging our fellow human beings we tend to use the wrong standards. We either evaluate people by their bank balances or we use physical features as a measure of spiritual qualifications. This what Jesus meant when He said: “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”³ We read about Samuel as he went to Bethlehem to anoint the new king who would replace Saul: “When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, ‘Surely the LORD’s anointed stands here before the LORD.’ But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.’”⁴

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary comments: “This shows, not what should be, but what is the common way of the world-to be shy of the poor and fond of the rich. Few will give countenance to those whom the world frowns upon, though otherwise worthy of respect: The poor, who should be pitied, and encouraged, and relieved, is hated, looked strange upon, and kept at a distance, even by his own neighbor, who, before he fell into disgrace, was intimate with him and pretended to have a kindness for him. Most are swallow-friends, that are gone in winter. It is good having God our friend, for he will not desert us when we are poor. Every one will make court to those whom the world smiles upon, though otherwise unworthy: The rich have many friends, friends to their riches, in hope to get something out of them. There is little friendship in the world but what is governed by self-interest, which is no true friendship at all, nor what a wise man will either value himself on or put any confidence in. Those that make the world their God idolize those that have most of its good things, and seek their favor as if indeed they were Heaven’s favorites.”

The neighbor is the person who is supposed to love unconditionally. This love must be for what a person is, not for what he has. Lack of neighborly love can always be traced to a lack of love of God. Jesus linked the two together when He said: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”⁵ That is the reason God takes a lack of neighborly love so seriously and personally. God will say to us on the Day of Judgment: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”⁶

22 Do not those who plot evil go astray? But those who plan what is good find love and faithfulness.

The question is an academic one because the answer is obvious. The Hebrew word rendered “plot,” *charash*, is complicated because it has a variety of meaning. It can be translated “be still” as in the verse:

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1. Phil. 2:9-11
 2. II Thess. 1:9,10
 3. Luke 12:15

 4. I Sam. 16:6,7
 5. Matt. 22:37-40
 6. Matt. 25:40

“The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”¹ It can also mean “to plow” as in the verse: “Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together.”² In this verse its meaning is “to plot” as in “Do not plot harm against your neighbor, who lives trustfully near you.”³ Interestingly, the same word is used for those who plot evil as for those who plan what is good. We find some of the principle expressed in this word in Jesus’ parable of the dishonest manager. Jesus put him as an example not for what he did but for how he did it. The Lord concluded the story with the words: “For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”⁴ *The Book of Proverbs*, as we have seen, warns against being naïve. Paul said: “I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.”⁵

Those who plot evil go astray. The Hebrew word *ta`ah* means “to vacillate.” It is the attitude that causes us to fall. We find it in the verse: “If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey *wandering off*, be sure to take it back to him.”⁶ The love that the good people find is *cheved*, God’s covenant love, rendered in the KJV as “lovingkindness.” The Hebrew text calls it “mercy.” “Faithfulness” is the translation of the Hebrew word *emeth*, meaning “truth” such as found in the character of God and impersonated in Jesus Christ.⁷

A footnote in the NIV states that “find love and faithfulness” can also be read: “show love and faithfulness.” In fact the verb is lacking in the Hebrew text so almost any verb can be inserted. It is true though that those who find mercy and lovingkindness in God will also show it to their fellowmen.

23 All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.

24 The wealth of the wise is their crown, but the folly of fools yields folly.

The virtue of labor is extolled several times in *The Book of Proverbs*. We read: “Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor.” “He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty.”⁸ We have seen before that much of the wealth of the United States of America can be traced to what is commonly called “Protestant work ethics.” There is both virtue and danger in the concept. Since God created us in His image and likeness we ought to give ourselves wholeheartedly to what we do. But we must also realize that it is God who holds our lifeline and gives the energy to work. That hard work brings profit is a general rule but it does not necessarily point to anything spiritual.

There are some things that cannot be obtained by hard work. Paul says about the forgiveness of our sins and God’s justification: “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”⁹ Once we have been justified, we ought to give it all we have. Paul also said: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”¹⁰ And “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”¹¹ Sanctification and laziness are

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1. Ex. 14:14
 2. Deut. 22:10
 3. Prov. 3:29
 4. Luke 16:8
 5. Rom. 16:19
 6. Ex. 23:4
 7. See John 14:6
 8. See Prov. 12:24; 28:19.
 9. Rom. 4:4,5
 10. Col. 3:23,24

incompatible. God's grace will make us work. Paul testified again: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."¹

There is in the Hebrew word *`etseb*, "labor" an element of pain. We find the same word in the verse: "To the woman [God] said, 'I will greatly increase your *pains* in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children.'"² The word has also the meaning of "an earthen vessel." The multiple meaning of the word gives it great depth because it places what we do against the background of the fall. The primary meaning of the verse, therefore, may be that we ought to work hard to free ourselves from the curse sin laid upon us. Some of this may have been in Paul's mind when he wrote to Timothy: "But women will be saved through childbearing — if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety."³ This verse has been widely misunderstood and misinterpreted.

V.23 contrasts "hard work" with "mere talk." Some people are born talkers; others go through life saying few words. But although that is seemingly the point Solomon wants to make in this verse, it can hardly be Gospel truth. What ultimately counts is achievement. James puts "mere talk" in the context of obedience. We read: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."⁴

V.24 could be misinterpreted in the same manner as v.23. If wealth is taken here as material possessions, Solomon seems to be preaching here a Gospel of "Green Power." Some Bible scholars allow for a copying mistake in the word "riches." The change of one letter would make "riches" into "prudence" or "wisdom." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes therefore: "Not riches, but 'wisdom, gives a crown of glory' (Prov 4:9). 'The prudent are crowned with knowledge,' not with riches (Prov 14:18). Therefore the sense is, Wisdom (the opposite of 'folly'), being 'the crown of the wise,' constitutes their true 'riches,' and results in the heavenly riches; 'but the foolishness of fools' is not 'riches' to them, as 'the wise man's crown' of wisdom is to him, but is and continues 'folly' - i.e., emptiness-neither an ornamental 'crown' nor enriching wisdom." The Living Bible probably catches the spirit of the verse best with the paraphrase: "Wise men are praised for their wisdom; fools are despised for their folly."

25 A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is deceitful.

26 He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge.

27 The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death.

This is the third time a truthful witness is contrasted to a deceitful one in *The Book of Proverbs*.⁵ The Living Bible renders v.25 – "A witness who tells the truth saves good men from being sentenced to death, but a false witness is a traitor." Most Bible scholars tend to place this verse in a courtroom, but that is not absolutely necessary. Witnessing to the truth of the Gospel will lead to the salvation of souls. That

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11. I Cor. 10:31
 1. I Cor. 15:10
 2. Gen. 3:16
 3. I Tim. 2:15
 4. James 1:22-27
 5. See Prov. 12:17; 14:5.

interpretation also establishes unity with the following two verses. If we insist in placing v.25 in a courtroom, the witness of the truthful will only save the life of the innocent. And the false witness is only harmful if an innocent party is condemned through it. In the case against Jesus Christ the false witnesses had no actual part in His condemnation. Jesus was put to death on the basis of His own testimony. We read: “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, ‘This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’ ‘ Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, ‘Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?’ But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’ ‘He is worthy of death,’ they answered.”¹ Not all true testimonies save lives.

When we live the truth, as Jesus did, we will not only save souls but we will model salvation to our children. The Hebrew text reads literally: “In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence and his children shall have a place of refuge.” The Hebrew word *‘oz* does not mean “stronghold” as does *ma’owz*,² but it does convey a sense of security, which makes it a strength that is not our own. We find the same word in the verse: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”³ Since it is in most cases used in connection with protection, the suggestion is that the children observe what their father does in time of trouble; he puts himself under God’s protection. It is this example that becomes their own safeguard against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes here: “Godliness protects the soul by its solidity (26) and its vitality (27). Both aspects are necessary, since evil not only attacks but attracts us; therefore the man of God must know (and show his family, 26b) something both stronger and better.” *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes from Pope Gregory’s *Morals on the Book of Job*: “As in the way of the world fear gives rise to weakness, so in the way of God fear produces strength. In truth, our mind so much the more valorously sets at naught all the terrors of temporal vicissitudes, the more thoroughly that it submits itself in fear to the Author of those same temporal things. And being stabilized in the fear of the Lord, it encounters nothing without it to fill it with alarm, in that whereas it is united to the Creator of all things by a righteous fear, it is by a certain powerful influence raised high above them all.”

In v.27 the fear of the Lord is represented as a life-giving fountain. “Fear” is best rendered as “awe,” which *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines as: “profound and reverent dread of the supernatural.” We want to rectify this definition by reminding ourselves that “the supernatural” is a Person not some undefined entity. The realization of who God is will jolt us out of the mystification sin spins around us into a wholesome reality. C. S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, writes: “It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. ‘Look out!’ we cry, ‘it’s alive.’ And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back—I would have done so myself if I could—and proceed no further with Christianity. An ‘impersonal God’—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a *real* footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (‘Man’s search for God!’) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him: We never meant to come to *that!* Worse still, supposing He had found us?”

1. Matt. 26:59-65
2. See Ps. 27:1.
3. Ps. 46:1

It is this reality, this being caught by *The Hound of Heaven*¹ that will become the ultimate thirst-quencher for us and make us into people who point others to the source. As Jesus said: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”² This fear of the Lord will not only save our own life. In Paul’s words: “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”³

28 A large population is a king’s glory, but without subjects a prince is ruined.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, captures well the gist of this verse in his paraphrase: “The mark of a good leader is loyal followers; leadership is nothing without a following.” Our modern western world is running out of kings and princes. Nobility ought to be placed on the list of threatened species. It is difficult for us to trace the origin of the monarchy. In the early stages of Israel’s history there was no place for a king. We read that Gideon refused the kingdom: “The Israelites said to Gideon, ‘Rule over us — you, your son and your grandson — because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian.’ But Gideon told them, ‘I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.’”⁴ It was not until the end of Samuel’s life that Israel enthroned its first king. Both Saul and David were commoners who rose to power without running for office. But the historical background of the times indicates that, in the Middle East, kingdoms were the common pattern of government.

Modern-day monarchs are no longer absolute rulers. Our western world only recognizes kings and queens within the framework of a constitution. This may still be different in third-world countries. Solomon, the author of this verse, was an absolute monarch who had the power of life and death over his subjects. Lord Acton’s warning that absolute power corrupts was certainly applicable to him and those he wrote about. This verse, therefore, must be seen as a reminder that kings are there for the people, not people for the kings. It is a trumpet blast that calls back to reality.

The application of this truth is much wider than to kings and queens alone. After all, they can be counted on the fingers of our hands. We are reminded of the fact that if we are given any status in life, any position that comes with honor and dignity, it is not because of what we are in ourselves. If we forget the purpose for which God endows us with authority and honor we face the same ruin as a prince without people. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “It is a reminder that solitary splendor is self-extinguishing. The true leader glories in the vigor of his followers.”

29 A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly.

30 A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

The Hebrew text reads: “He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalts folly.” The Hebrew word, translated “understanding” is *tabuwn*, which means “intelligence.” God said about Bezalel, the man who made the ark of the covenant and did most of the work on the tabernacle: “I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and *knowledge* in all kinds of crafts.”⁵ We could call it a talent, a God-given ability. Paul mentions patience as part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.⁶

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1. Title of a poem by Francis Thompson.
 2. John 7:37-39
 3. II Cor. 5:11,20
 4. Judg. 8:22,23
 5. Ex. 31:3
 6. See Gal. 5:22.

The verse does not give us any details or illustrations to indicate how patience that leads to understanding works in everyday life. Solomon seems to say here that the Holy Spirit will lead us to look behind the facts and investigate the motives that lead to certain acts. A French proverb says: “To understand all means to pardon all.” The fact that God will take our motives into account on the Day of Judgment can be encouraging or frightening. The quick-tempered man is the person with the short fuse, who lacks the soothing influence of the Holy Spirit and who consequently jumps to conclusions. *The Pulpit Commentary* gives another quote from Pope Gregory’s *Morals on the Book of Job*: “By anger wisdom is parted with, so that we are left wholly in ignorance what to do, and in what order to do it.... Anger withdraws the light of understanding, while by agitating it troubles the mind.”

The attitude of the patient man not only benefits others, he himself experiences the blessing of it. That which makes the bones of the impatient, the envious, rot, is life and health to the body of the person filled with the Holy Spirit. *The Septuagint* reads v.30: “The man of gentle mind is the physician of the heart.” There is no doubt about it that our state of mind has its bearing on the condition of our body. *The Book of Proverbs* emphasizes constantly that joy and health are related.

31 He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.

What distinguishes man from all other creatures is the image of God in which he is created. Failure to recognize that image in our fellowmen proves that the same image is fading in the perpetrator. It is obvious that the rich rule over the poor in the world in which we live. Like primitive animists, we attribute spiritual qualities to material possessions. We believe that money is power, influence, and status. The society in which we live seems to confirm this misconception. When God lets His eternal light shine upon our assets, we will see how wrong we were in our assumptions. That is why James lashes out against the rich in his epistle: “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.”¹

But it is not only the material advantage that one person may have over another that makes for oppression. A lack of love of God will eventually make us all into murderers. The Apostle John emphasizes this truth in his epistle: “This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”² The short of it all is that if we really love God we will honor Him in our fellowmen.

32 When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous have a refuge.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “The wicked is driven away in his wickedness: but the righteous has hope in his death.” The difference between the two renderings lies in the interpretation of the Hebrew

1. James 5:1-6

2. I John 3:11-16

word *ra*, which means “evil,” “trouble,” or “destruction.” We find the word for the first time in the Bible in the verse “And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and *evil*.”¹ But in Nehemiah, Nehemiah says to the leaders in Jerusalem: “You see the *trouble* we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”² In Esther it stands for “destruction” as in the verse: “The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their *destruction*. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them.”³

Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases the verse: “The evil of bad people leaves them out in the cold; the integrity of the good people creates a safe place for living.”

It seems that calamity is used here as an equivalent for death. That parallel thought points to the finality of life, to the moment when the books are opened. The author of Hebrews states: “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...”⁴ At that point all the wickedness of the unredeemed soul will drag him down to hell. But the righteous will find himself protected. The verse does not elaborate on what is represented by “refuge.” Israel’s last night in Egypt provides a good illustration. God gave Moses instructions about the preparation of the Passover and how the blood of the lamb was to be applied to the doorposts of the house of the Israelites. God said: “The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.”⁵ Those who have put themselves under the protection of the blood of the Lamb during their life on earth will find themselves protected in the hour of death. Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”⁶

33 Wisdom reposes in the heart of the discerning and even among fools she lets herself be known.

34 Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.

35 A king delights in a wise servant, but a shameful servant incurs his wrath.

The Hebrew text reads v.33: “Wisdom rests in the heart of him that understands: but that which is in the midst of fools is made known.” Some Bible scholars are of the opinion that “in the midst of fools wisdom makes itself known” is the better rendering. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states: “Two meanings of the Heb. text are possible, (a) A wise man does not parade his knowledge; a fool does (*cf.* 12:23). (b) While wisdom’s true abode is with the wise, even among fools it is not wholly unrecognized.”

We stated earlier that the Hebrew word *biyn*, rendered “discerning” in the NIV, may be one of the most important words in *The Book of Proverbs* since it occurs at least thirty times. It is important to note that wisdom is a matter of the heart. That does not mean that it merely involves our emotions but that it occupies the center of our being. When knowledge, which resides in the head, moves to the heart it becomes wisdom. Since wisdom comes from God it helps us to understand matters and issues that may be hidden to others. We rarely understand the importance of what happens to us and around us until God makes His light shine upon the matter. We read in First Chronicles about the “men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”⁷ Paul calls this “having the mind of Christ.”⁸

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1. Gen. 2:9
 2. Neh. 2:17
 3. Est. 9:2
 4. Heb. 9:27
 5. Ex. 12:13
 6. John 5:24
 7. See I Chron. 12:32.

Linking these three verses together helps us to see that the gift of wisdom is not meant to benefit only the person who receives it. Wisdom serves the king and produces righteousness for the whole nation. In the past the text “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” was printed on some money bills in the Netherlands. I suppose the coming of the Euro brought about changes in what countries print on their bills and even if the Netherlands had maintained the guilder currency, the thought that morality is a private affair would have made printing Bible verses on banknotes antiquated. I know of no nation that adopts God’s righteousness as their banner.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word rendered “disgrace” is *cheched*. It is the same word that is rendered “mercy” or “lovingkindness” in other places. The only other place in the Bible where *cheched* is used in a pejorative way is in the context of incest: “If a man marries his sister, the daughter of either his father or his mother, and they have sexual relations, it is a *disgrace*.”¹ This makes *cheched* into a two-edged sword. God’s mercy and lovingkindness will mean grace to the righteous and disgrace to the unrighteous.

The last verse in this cluster cannot be applied to every king who ever ruled. As very few nations, if any maintain righteousness as their standard, so few kings delight in advisors who have the mind of Christ. It takes wisdom to recognize wisdom. We may assume that Solomon had set this criterion for himself, at least at the time he wrote these words. He may have thought of his older brother Absalom, whose counselor was Ahithophel and who perished in his rebellion against his father David. Although Solomon was an absolute monarch he indicates in these words that leadership is a body function, not the role of a single individual. The head is nothing without the body; it is fed by the body even as it directs the workings of the body.

The Moffatt Translation renders this verse “The king favors an able minister; his anger is for the incompetent.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, generalizes the application of this verse with the paraphrase “Diligent work gets a warm commendation; shiftless work earns an angry rebuke.”

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “Thus Joseph was advanced to the highest post in Egypt, owing to the wisdom which he displayed; so, too, in the case of Daniel.”

5. Chapter Fifteen

1 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

2 The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.

Some bumper stickers proclaim: “Jesus is the answer!” To which some cynics have responded: “What is the question?” V.1 states neither what the question is, nor what answer to give; it presents a principle. The Hebrew word for “gentle” is *rak*, meaning “tender.” It is used for young animals and children. “Harsh” is the translation of the Hebrew word *’etseb*, which comes from a word meaning “an earthen vessel.” The suggestion is that of a sharp edge of a broken bottle. We find it in the verse: “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with *pain* you will give birth to children.’ ”² And also in “It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of *sorrows*: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.”³ Without looking for the details of the question and the answer, we understand that the gentle answer comes from the person who has a spirit that belongs to a new creation. It breathes the freshness of springtime, the scent of blossom and the birth of calves and children. The harsh retort is like a broken vessel that cuts to the quick. The one breathes life, the other death.

The word “wrath” and “anger” have an emotional content. The Hebrew word *chemah*, “wrath” comes from a word meaning “heat.” The word *’aph*, “anger” refers to the nostrils and suggest rapid, feverish

8. See I Cor. 2:9-16.

1. Lev. 20:17

2. Gen. 3:16

3. Ps. 127:2 (KJV)

breathing. We live in a world in which words are used as potsherds, the sharp edges of which cause injury. The gentle answer is the one that is related to the Word that created babies and young animals, that calls life out of death. This is the word that comes from wisdom. It is linked to “the fear of the LORD [which] is the beginning of knowledge.”¹

The Hebrew of v.2 reads literally: “The tongue of the wise uses wisdom aright: but the mouth of the fool pours out foolishness.” The verb “uses aright” is the translation of the Hebrew *yatab*, which means “to do something well.” It suggests expertise and thoroughness. When King Saul had his panic attacks he was advised to find someone who could play the harp. We read: “So Saul said to his attendants, ‘Find someone who *plays well* and bring him to me.’”² And in Jeremiah we read: “For if you *thoroughly amend* your ways and your doings, if you *thoroughly execute* judgment between a man and his neighbor...”³ We said before that wisdom is knowledge that moved from the head to the heart. This verse teaches that the Holy Spirit can teach us to acquire expertise in the use of wisdom. After all, what is the use of wisdom if it is not applied to everyday life?

3 The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases: “God doesn’t miss a thing – he’s alert to good and evil alike.” This verse introduces a truth that recurs several times in this chapter. We read in vv.8,9: “The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him. The LORD detests the way of the wicked but he loves those who pursue righteousness.” And v.11 states: “Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD — how much more the hearts of men!” The seer Hanani admonished Asa king of Judah with the words: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”⁴

These verses show us what God’s omniscience ought to mean to us in the way we live our daily lives. The Psalmist describes the attitude of some perpetrators of crime: “They say, ‘The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob pays no heed.’ Take heed, you senseless ones among the people; you fools, when will you become wise? Does he who implanted the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see? Does he who disciplines nations not punish? Does he who teaches man lack knowledge? The LORD knows the thoughts of man; he knows that they are futile.”⁵ Nothing will keep us so effectively from sin as the realization of God’s eye upon us. The foolish thought that we would be able to hide anything from an all-knowing God is indication of lacking a sense of reality. If God were not omniscient, He would be less than perfect. And if an imperfect God is the One who sustains all of creation, we have no guarantee that even the very atoms in our body would hold together. The whole material universe of which we are part would disintegrate. Our very existence is proof of God’s perfection! The Apostle Peter suggests that the thought of such disintegration ought to stimulate us to holy living. We read: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”⁶

King David built one of his psalms around this truth of God’s omniscience. After stating: “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me,” he says: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too

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1. See Prov. 1:7.
 2. I Sam. 16:17
 3. Jer. 7:5 (NKJV)
 4. II Chron. 16:9
 5. Ps. 94:7-11
 6. II Peter 3:10-12

lofty for me to attain.” Then he concludes with the prayer: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”¹ There is a mystery in the fact that we can surrender to God’s omniscience and thus benefit from it in being guided through life. This may be too profound for us to understand. God’s all seeing eye is the opposite of the “Big Brother is watching you!” slogan in George Orwell’s book *1984*. Orwell describes the suffocation of a totalitarian regime that suppresses all personal liberty. God’s search of the nooks and crannies of our heart will set us free if we surrender ourselves to Him.

4 The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.

This is the fourth time in *The Book of Proverbs* that “the tree of life” is mentioned.² The Hebrew text reads literally: “A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit.” The NIV’s rendering “the tongue that brings healing” is quite correct, because the Hebrew word *marpe*’ conveys the idea of “medicine” or “a cure.” We find the word in the explanation of God’s reasons for leading the people of Israel into captivity. “The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no *remedy*.”³ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* refers to this as: “Speech framed according to the laws of the heavenly pharmacopoeia, with the various Scripture ingredients for healing soul-sickness, and for strengthening those spiritually well.”

The coming of sin into God’s creation did enormous damage to the word. It began when Eve doubted the Word of God that had called everything into existence. Man’s choice to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil cut the human race off from the tree of life. It also corrupted human speech. The gift of speech became the devil’s tool and produced the lie in human life. We all are owners of a deceitful tongue that crushes the human spirit. The only spoken word that brought about healing came from the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ. We read in Matthew’s Gospel: “A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.”⁴ No one ever spoke such healing words. The Apostle Peter demonstrated that this healing word is contained in the Name of Jesus. When Peter and John encountered the paraplegic at the temple gate, Peter said: “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” We read: “Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.”⁵

We hardly realize how much damage our unsanctified speech can cause in the lives of our fellowmen. Without the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit we will crush the spirit of others. David’s prayer ought to be our constant supplication: “Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.”⁶

5 A fool spurns his father’s discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.

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1. See Ps. 139:1,6,23-24.
 2. See Prov. 3:18; 11:30 and 13:12.
 3. II Chr. 36:16,17
 4. Matt. 8:2,3
 5. Acts 3:6-8
 6. Ps. 141:3

The thought expressed in this verse is not new, but the use of words that differ from parallel statement put it in a new light. The word for prudence here is not the same as the word rendered “prudent” in the first chapter. In Chapter Three Verse One, for instance the Hebrew word rendered “prudent life” is *tsedeq*, which has the connotation of being naturally, morally, or legally right. The Hebrew word *aram*, used in this verse, suggests being smooth or cunning. The word has obviously not the derogatory meaning that might be given to it in another context. We could say that it takes discipline to be able to accept discipline.

6 *The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings them trouble.*

7 *The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools.*

V.6 expresses in terms of material blessing what v.7 defines as spiritual values. Jesus used the same image in the short parable that concludes His series of parables in Matthew’s Gospel. We read: “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”¹ The real treasure, that what makes one truly rich, is the truth of the kingdom of heaven. As the gold of the streets in the New Jerusalem is the real gold of which the precious metal we know is a mere shadow, so is the truth of God’s Word the real riches of the soul. One may live in a shed and possess the treasures of a palace.

In connection with this, Jesus’ advice fits well into the context of the above statement: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”²

8 *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.*

9 *The LORD detests the way of the wicked but he loves those who pursue righteousness.*

The double parallel in these two verses reveals the unity between our confession and our actions. “Sacrifice” in v.8 matches “the way” in v.9 in the same way as “prayer” and “pursue righteousness” does. “Sacrifice” also goes with “prayer.” The Hebrew of these two verse states literally that the sacrifice and the way of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord. The Hebrew word *tow`ebah* stands for something disgusting, and it contains a reference to idolatry.

The underlying thought is, first of all, that prayer and sacrifice belong together. This was much more obvious to the Old Testament believer than it may be to us. No one could approach God without killing a sacrificial animal that substituted for the life of the person who came to pray. In a more total and absolute way do we come before God in prayer in the Name of Jesus. But often our use of “in Jesus’ Name” has been reduced to a mere formula. The writer of The Epistle to the Hebrews states: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”³ But we rarely pray our prayers in such a way that we place them consciously again this Old Testament background. It is good and sound, though, to keep the truth before our eyes that all our prayers must be based upon the death of our Lord Jesus Christ in our behalf.

1. Matt. 13:52

2. Matt. 6:19-21

3. Heb. 10:19-22

The second, more obvious truth is that prayer and lifestyle cannot be separated. The very fact that someone else died for us requires the recognition that we have forfeited our life and that the only way to live is to live the life of Christ. The Apostle Paul expressed this by stating: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”¹ If we pray in Jesus’ Name and keep on living our own life as if we have a right to live as we please, we are, in fact, an abomination to God.

These verses do not merely condemn prayer that does not come from the heart. It is not our emotional involvement that is paramount, although desirable, but our acceptance of the legal reality of our relationship with God that counts.

10 Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path; he who hates correction will die.

11 Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD — how much more the hearts of men!

The King James Version reads: “Correction is grievous unto him that forsaketh the way: and he that hateth reproof shall die.” Most Bible scholars agree that the Hebrew text allows for either translation. *The Vulgate* uses the words “the way of life” for “the path.” Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases the verse: “It’s a school of hard knocks for those who leave God’s path, a dead-end street for those who hate God’s rules.” Although the primary meaning of the word “discipline” is punishment, it has the added sense of correction. And correction, that is a return to the path, does not seem to be the meaning of the verse. It is the rebellion within us, the cry “Let us break their chains and throw off their fetters”² that describes the mentality of those who leave the path of life. Leaving the path beyond the point of no return will lead to eternal separation from God who is the source of life. The death one dies is the second death.

It is in that context that Solomon says, “Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD.” The Hebrew words for “death” and “destruction” are *Sheol* and *‘abaddown*. Both refer to the abode of the dead, which the Greeks called *Hades*. Both *Sheol* and *Hades* have a neutral connotation; they are not necessarily places of perdition. But *‘abaddown* is the place where people perish. Solomon may have been inspired by Job who, using the same words, said: “Death is naked before God; Destruction lies uncovered.”³ Death may be for us “the undiscover’d country from which bourn no traveler returns,” it holds no secrets for God.

The question is what do we do with such knowledge. For those who have chosen eternal separation from God, the realization that even in separation God is never absent will add to the misery. For David the thought was comforting. He stated: “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths [in Sheol], you are there.”⁴

The statement that *Sheol* and *Abaddown* are an open book for God can be the greatest consolation given to us. It equals the assurance the Apostle John gives us: “This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”⁵

Looking at these verses, we tend to put them into the context of God’s omniscience. But what about His compassion? How would God react to seeing *Sheol* and *Abaddown* and the content of the human heart showing the same kind of corruption? God created man for His glory and love. Looking at the pool of iniquity that is the human heart and the garbage dump of humanity called *Abaddown*, it seems as if the purpose for which God created, fell sadly short. We know, however, that God Himself entered *Sheol* in the

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1. Gal. 2: 20
 2. See Ps. 2:3.
 3. Job 26:6
 4. Ps. 139:8
 5. I John 3:19,20

person of Jesus Christ and made both *Abaddown* and the human heart into a place of glory where the Holy Spirit can abide.

12 A mocker resents correction; he will not consult the wise.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “A scorner loves not him that reproves, neither will he go unto the wise.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases: “Know-it-alls don’t like being told what to do; they avoid the company of wise men and women.” We saw earlier that *hwts*, the Hebrew word for “mocker,” suggests someone who unsuccessfully tries to speak a foreign language. We can imagine someone repeating serious and wise advice in a way that pokes fun at the message or the messenger. A good illustration is found in the story of Lot, who on his last night in Sodom tried to warn the fiancées of his daughters. We read: “So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, ‘Hurry and get out of this place, because the LORD is about to destroy the city!’ But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.”¹ It is easy to miss the message if we look on the form in which it comes to us. The fact that a person is not dressed according to the latest fashion does not mean that his message is not up-to-date. The text suggests that rebellion against God may turn into aversion of those who testify to the message. Rejection of the message Jesus preached, ultimately turned into hatred toward His person and led to His crucifixion.

13 A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit.

14 The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly.

15 All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.

16 Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil.

17 Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred.

The theme that binds these verses together is the relationship between inner happiness and outward circumstances. The centerpiece is the statement: “the cheerful heart has a continual feast.” V.13 seems to use the words “heart” and “spirit” interchangeably. But the two words stand for different parts of human life. The heart is the center of human life, both physically and emotionally. The heart as a pump that propels the blood through the body keeps us alive, but it also functions as the control center of all our emotions. That is why Solomon advises: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”² The spirit is our lifeline with God. It is the organ of fellowship with our Creator, which He breathed into our nostrils at the time of creation.

Physical or emotional pain can impair the functioning of the spirit and hamper our fellowship with God. Certain circumstances can bring a smile upon our face and a sparkle in our eyes. But if our joy and enjoyment is merely fed by outward circumstances, we build our house upon the sand. The joy that can withstand the storms of life is what reaches us through the spirit. When the people in Nehemiah’s day came under conviction of sin at the reading of the law by Ezra, Nehemiah told them: “Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”³ And the Apostle Paul tells us that this joy ought to be our constant source of satisfaction: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”⁴

The author uses three different words to describe the condition of the human heart. The first word is *sameach*, which is probably best illustrated in the Psalm that speaks about the joys of motherhood: “He settles the barren woman in her home as a *happy* mother of children. Praise the LORD.”⁵ The second word

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1. Gen. 19:14
 2. See Prov. 4:23.
 3. Neh. 8:10
 4. Phil. 4:4
 5. Ps. 113:9

is one we encountered before, *biyn*, “discerning.” It is the word about which we said that it might be the most important word in *The Book of Proverbs*, occurring more than thirty times in the book. It has the added shade of meaning of separating mentally, or the ability to look at things with an analytical mind. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes here that the verbs used are purposely “ill-matched” to give the edge to the contrast. The seeking in v.14 is purposeful; the feeding of the fool resembles a random nibbling. The Hebrew word *ra`ah* denotes the grazing of cattle. The third word is *towb* (v.15), which means “good” in the widest sense of the word. We find it the first time in the Bible in the verse: “God saw that the light was good.”¹ We may add to that the word that describes wellness in the cheerful face. The Hebrew word is *yatab*. It is the word Jacob used to remind God of His promise to him: “But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”² This gives us a survey of the essence of blessing the Lord bestows upon us to lead us through the hardships of life. Adversity tends to block our vision. But the joy of the Lord allows us to see through circumstances and understand their transient character. We understand that “what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”³ When Paul wrote: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”⁴ he was wasting away in a Roman prison. Vv. 16 and 17 give us the keys to the continuous celebration in the fear of the Lord and in love. Where those two are present there is victory over circumstances. These verses emphasize that which is important, which is contrary to what we usually consider to be desirable.

18 A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.

The Hebrew word rendered “hot-tempered” is *chemah*, which refers to “heat.” It has the added meaning of “poison.”

The Pulpit Commentary remarks: “It requires two to make a quarrel, and where one keeps his temper and will not be provoked, anger must subside.” We may add that it takes two carnal natures to start a fight. *The Vulgate* renders this verse: “He who is patient soothes aroused quarrels.” *The Septuagint* reads: “A long suffering man appeases even a coming battle.”

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: “The point here is that quarrels depend on people far more than on subject-matter.” “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”⁵ It is the presence and blessing of God that creates a fellowship of peace among men. As the Psalmist sings: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”⁶ It is not only so that real peace reigns among those who belong to the Lord, but our fellowship with God has a healing propensity in society. In Ezekiel’s vision of the water that trickled from the sanctuary and became a swollen river that ended into the Dead Sea, we read that an angel tells him: “When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.”⁷ That illustrates the truth expounded here.

19 The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway.

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1. Gen. 1:4
 2. Gen. 32:12
 3. See II Cor. 4:18.

 4. Phil. 4:4
 5. Matt. 5:9
 6. Ps. 133:1,3
 7. See Ezek. 47:8,9.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “The way of a slothful man is as a hedge of thorns: but the way of the righteous is made plain.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “Because he is slothful, he imagines ten thousand difficulties in the way which cannot be surmounted; but they are all the creatures of his own imagination, and that imagination is formed by his sloth.”

The word “thorns” is interesting. *The Pulpit Commentary*, quoting a book by Geikie, entitled *Holy Land and Bible*, states: “The word for ‘thorn’ here is *chedek*. It occurs elsewhere only in ... Micah 7:4, where the Authorized Version has ‘briar;’ but the particular plant intended is not ascertained. Most writers consider it to be some spiny specimen of the *solanum*. The word refers, it is thought, to a class of plants the name of one of which, at least, the miscalled ‘apple of Sodom,’ is well known in poetry, and is a proverbial expression for anything which promises fair but utterly disappoints on trial. This plant, which is really a kind of potato, grows everywhere in the warmer parts of Palestine, rising to a widely branching shrub from three to five feet high; the wood thickly set with spines; the flower like that of the potato, and the fruit, which is larger than the potato apple, perfectly round, and changing from yellow to bright red as it ripens.... The *osher* of the Arab is the true apple of Sodom. A very tropical-looking plant, its fruit is like a large smooth apple or orange, and hangs in clusters of three or four together. When ripe, it is yellow, and looks fair and attractive, and is soft to the touch, but if pressed, it bursts with a crack, and only the broken shell and a raw of small seeds in a half open pod, with a few dry filaments, remain in the hand.”

There is in “thorns” a reference to the curse upon the ground that followed Adam’s sin. God said to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you.”¹ There is an interesting contrast between the sluggard and the upright. This indicates, as Derek Kidner suggests, that laziness is a form of unrighteousness.

It also suggests that righteousness will overcome the curse. The Apostle Paul elaborates on this when he states in his Epistle to the Romans: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”² God’s glory in us will eventually take care of the thorns and all the other aspects of the curse.

20 A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish man despises his mother.

21 Folly delights a man who lacks judgment, but a man of understanding keeps a straight course.

What links these two verses together is the theme of joy and enjoyment. As in English, both words are related in Hebrew, though not identical. *Samach* means “to brighten up,” “cause to rejoice.” *Simchah* means “gladness” or “glee.”

Living in the way of God’s wisdom has a tendency to work its way backward in our most intimate relationships: the bond with our parents. If our parents played their god-given role well, we received the signals of God’s love in the strong protecting love of our father and in the warmth of affection of our mother. Both forms of love are needed for a child to feel safe in life and to grow up into a well-developed and well-balanced human being. It may be easier for us to recognize love in the breastfeeding of our mother than in the bear hug of our father, but both are essentially the same. In loving God we pay back some of what our father invested in us. Rejection of God’s love for us means rejection of that what gives meaning to our human relationships. Despising one’s mother is a sin against our very own nature. This verse shows us how despicable foolishness is. The Hebrew word *bazah* “to despise” has the meaning of “to hold in contempt.” It

1. Gen. 3:18

2. Rom. 8:19-23

is as if we tell our mother that she did wrong to bring us into this world. We find the same word in the verse: “So Esau despised his birthright.”¹

The above is, of course, only relevant if a family is what it is supposed to be, a place of safety and love, a workplace where we learn what God’s love consists of. Few families, if any, are places where God can demonstrate His love fully to us through genuine and faithful examples of parental love. And even in those that come close to the heavenly reality, there are children who turn their back to loving parents and go their own foolish way. The rule: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it”² is not absolute. Some wise parents have raised foolish children. Righteousness and wisdom are not hereditary. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, calls the foolish man in v.21 “The playboy.”

22 Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.

23 A man finds joy in giving an apt reply — and how good is a timely word!

The Hebrew text of v.22 reads: “Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counselors they are established.” The word *machashabah*, rendered here “plans,” has a variety of meanings varying from “a thought,” to “an invention.” A parallel statement we read earlier, “For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure,”³ may help us to see the possible context in which this proverb is placed. “Counsel,” *cowd* in Hebrew, has an air of secrecy about it. We find it in the verse: “The LORD *confides* in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.” In the KJV: “*The secret* of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.”⁴ And also in: “Hide me from the *conspiracy* of the wicked, from that noisy crowd of evildoers.”⁵ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “This is the force of the plural noun with the verb singular.”

We must not conclude from the above that when God speaks to us personally, we ought to go around asking advice. I am reminded of a sermon outline about the will of God that states: “Once you know the will of God (1) Do nothing less; (2) Do nothing more; (3) Do nothing else!” Another proverb we will come upon later speaks about the matter of personal obedience: “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.”⁶

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, adds color and a different décor to v.23 with the paraphrase: “Congenial conversation—what a pleasure! The right word at the right time—beautiful!” We may find some connection here with the secret council in the previous verse, but we can also take this as a praise of eloquence. A later proverb states: “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.”⁷ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes rather dryly: “It is as preeminently ‘good’ as it is rare.”

There is a joy in eloquence that rewards the speaker as well as the hearer. There is a danger for the speaker to be carried away by his own eloquence. Apples of gold may be beautiful to the eye, but they cannot be eaten. When the beauty of the word overshadows the meaning we have reason to be concerned. Sin entered this world by way of distortion of the word. But then also “The Word became flesh and made his

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1. Gen. 25:34
 2. Prov. 22:6
 3. See Prov. 11:14.
 4. Ps. 25:14
 5. Ps. 64:2
 6. Prov. 19:21
 7. Prov. 25:11

dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹

The Matthew Henry's Commentary, in its own eloquent way, states: “1. We speak wisely when we speak seasonably: The answer of the mouth will be our credit and joy when it is pertinent and to the purpose, and is spoken in due season, when it is needed and will be regarded, and, as we say, hits the joint. Many a good word comes short of doing the good it might have done, for want of being well-timed. Nor is anything more the beauty of discourse than to have a proper answer ready off-hand, just when there is occasion for it, and it comes in well. 2. If we speak wisely and well, it will redound to our own comfort and to the advantage of others: A man has joy by the answer of his mouth; he may take a pleasure, but may by no means take a pride, in having spoken so acceptably and well that the hearers admire him and say, ‘How good is it, and how much good does it do!’ ”

24 The path of life leads upward for the wise to keep him from going down to the grave.

25 The LORD tears down the proud man's house but he keeps the widow's boundaries intact.

26 The LORD detests the thoughts of the wicked, but those of the pure are pleasing to him.

27 A greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribes will live.

28 The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.

29 The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.

These verses are linked together by the two arrows that point up and down. V.24 points in the general direction and the following verses fill in the details. V.24 does not imply, of course, that the wise will not die. Both wise and fool end up in the same place as far as their body is concerned. Obviously, this verse does not address the body but the soul.

Vv.25-28 show the particulars of the downward trend in the pride of the heart, the wickedness of thought, the corruption of acts and the foulness of mouth. The way to hell is paved by human hands even though the Lord is mentioned twice in these verses and is heavily involved in what occurs. There is in v.24 a suggestion that the general trend for humanity is downward to hell. It is God's life-giving wisdom that is given to us that counteracts the downward suction. No one goes to heaven on the merits of his own fine character. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.”²

There are some interesting contrasts in v.25. The house of the proud man is compared to the boundaries of the widow. The Hebrew word rendered boundaries is *gebuwl*, which literally means a cord used for measuring a place. The house is what the proud person built with his own hands, but the territory of the widow is the piece of the Promised Land that the Lord had given to her deceased husband. There is also an obvious element of exploitation in the way the proud man built his house. The suggestion is that the building material was taken from the defenseless woman. Jesus severely rebuked the teachers of the law, saying: “They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.”³ It is obvious that the widow in this verse represents more than a poor woman whose husband died. She impersonates the victim of the ravages of death caused by sin in this world. She is a symbol of righteousness. Not all widows are poor and righteous, some are rich or wicked or both. But in this setting the emphasis is on the haughty man who ought to have compassion on the woman who lost her husband. Instead he decided to exploit her. The fact that he failed to see the power of divine protection that surrounded her became his undoing.

1. John 1:14

2. Eph. 2:8,9

3. Mark 12:40

The Hebrew word rendered “thoughts” in v. 26 is the same as in v.22, where it was translated “plans.” In this context “schemes” might be a better translation. Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases this verse: “God can’t stand evil scheming, but he puts words of grace and beauty on display.” The Hebrew allows “pure” to refer to either the words or to the person. In practice this makes little difference, since only pure persons can produce pure words. Jesus says: “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”¹ And James expresses the same thought with another picture: “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”² The Lord delights in the plans that we make in consultation with Him. What we hatch out in our own corrupted mind is an abomination to Him.

The man in v.27 is corrupt both in thought and in deed. A person who accepts bribes has lost all notion of righteousness and justice. The Hebrew word *mattanah* has the neutral meaning of “a present.” The context determines whether it is good or bad. Achan who took some of the booty of Jericho which had been consecrated to the Lord provides a good illustration of the ruin of a whole family by one person’s greed.³

The difference between the righteous and the wicked in v.28 is not so much in the condition of the heart as in its safety devices. Speaking about the human heart in general, the prophet Jeremiah exclaimed: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”⁴ The righteous knows that he cannot trust his own heart, that if he would not watch himself, evil would gush forth out of his heart as it does from the heart of the wicked. Jesus’ words pertain to every human heart: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”⁵ We all must pray with David: “Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.”⁶

When v.29 states: “The LORD is far from the wicked” it does not refer to distance but to intimacy. There is no close relationship between God and a person who wallows in sin. David expresses this in: “Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar.”⁷ It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to understand the workings of God’s omniscient, infinite mind. In reality God knows the tiniest details of all human thought and emotions. There cannot be a time when God would neglect to pay attention. In that sense God does not keep His distance from anybody. But as we use the concept of closeness also in a sense of emotional bonding, so we can say that God keeps away from everyone who removes himself from His presence.

We may say that the distance between God and man is more in the human heart, than in the heart of God. This being true, the second part of v.29, which mentions God’s answering the prayers of the righteous, must also speak of intimacy. It is in experiencing God that we receive the answer to our prayers. The Apostle John confirms this by saying: “This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.”⁸

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1. Matt. 7:17,18
 2. James 3:11,12
 3. See Joshua, Chapter Seven.
 4. Jer. 17:9
 5. Matt. 15:19
 6. Ps. 141:3
 7. Ps. 138:6
 8. I John 3:19-22

30 A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones.

The Hebrew reads literally: “The light of the eyes rejoices the heart and a good report makes the bones fat.” Eugene H. Peterson popularizes this with: “A twinkle in the eye means joy in the heart, and good news makes you feel fit as a fiddle.”

The eye is not only an optic miracle in the human body; it is also the mirror of the soul that reflects our deepest emotions. How God could create such a small part of our human anatomy that translates so perfectly what we experience and feel is beyond my comprehension. The way Peterson paraphrased the verse does not do justice to the Hebrew text. He tries to describe what joy and good news does to me; the text actually speaks about what it does to the other. We do not have to look in the mirror to see if there is a twinkle in our eyes. It is the other person who looks at our face who sees that there is joy in our heart and who wants to know what the good news is. In that sense our eyes give a clearer testimony of the Gospel than our mouth ever can. The eloquence of our eyes conveys the message more convincingly because it demonstrates what the Good News has done for us. The person on the receiving end may come to believe that if it helps our bones, maybe it will help his also.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The beaming glance that shows a pure, happy mind and a friendly disposition, rejoices the heart of him on whom it is turned. There is something infectious in the guileless, joyful look of a happy man or child, which has a cheering effect upon those who observe it.” The Commentary also observes that the Septuagint makes the sentiment altogether personal: “The eye that sees what is good rejoices the heart.”

31 He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise.

32 He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.

33 The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments upon these verses: “Wisdom repays all the rigors it prescribes; for admittedly its schooling is unflattering ... and arduous ... The point is made in different ways: 31a commends the process as life-giving; 31b as fitting one for the company of the wise; 32 punctures complacency by showing whom the unteachable person, paradoxically, is despising; and 33 puts the matter in perspective by varying the motto of the book (*cf.* 1:7) to show that the fear of the Lord is not merely the gateway by the whole path of wisdom.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases v.33 rather beautifully: “Fear-of-God is a school in skilled living—first you learn humility, then you experience glory.”

The life-giving rebuke is what turns us around on the way to perdition. “The life-giving rebuke” – in Hebrew *towkechah chay* – is the chastening that leads to life. In the story of King Hezekiah who saw Jerusalem threatened by the Assyrian armies of King Sennacherib, we find the word in Hezekiah’s statement in the context of a national emergency: “This day is a day of distress and *rebuke* and disgrace, as when children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them.”¹ It is the word that makes us realize the urgency of our condition. When Jesus asked Saul of Tarsus: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” it turned Saul’s life around. He left the circle of the Pharisees of which he had been a member and became a member of the church of Jesus Christ. Our conversion will always change our allegiance. It is impossible to be changed by the Word of God and continue to fellowship with fools.

The Hebrew of v.32 reads literally: “He that refuses instruction despises his own soul: but he that hears reproof gains understanding.” The positive side of this statement is found in another proverb: “He who gets wisdom loves his own soul.”² The Hebrew has a play-on-words that is lost in the translation. The word

1. II Kings 19:3

2. Prov. 19:8a

rendered “understanding” is *leb*, which means “the heart” both as the seat of emotions, will, and intellect, as in the sense of “the center of anything.” We find the word for the first time in Scripture in the verse: “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his *heart* was only evil all the time.”¹

The Hebrew of v.33 reads: “The fear of the Lord is instruction of wisdom: and before honor is humility.” Since the linking verb “is” is lacking in Hebrew, we could turn the phrase around and say: “Instruction of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.” The interesting feature of this proverb is that, in the parallel statement, wisdom is linked to humility and fear of the Lord to honor. Luther renders this proverb: “The fear of the Lord is discipline to wisdom.” The Hebrew word *muwcar* does indeed convey the concept of “chastisement.” If we render it as “instruction” it means learning the hard way. “The fear of the Lord” is that sense of reality that recognizes God for who He is. He is the one who sits on the throne for whom heaven and earth flee away.² God is not the person you can make deals with. Understanding who God is means wisdom. And humility before God will not be an attitude difficult to adopt when we see Him. The amazing thing is that, according to the suggestion of v.33, this will lead us to honor. The Living Bible reads: “Humility and reverence for the Lord will make you both wise and honored.” The honor we will receive when we humble ourselves is the honor God bestows upon us. In James’ words: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”³

B. Proverbs Encouraging Godly Lives 16:1—22:16

6. Chapter Sixteen

1 To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue.

2 All a man’s ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.

3 Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.

4 The LORD works out everything for his own ends — even the wicked for a day of disaster.

5 The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.

The theme that ties these five verses together is our accountability before God. The NIV creates a contrast between what man does and what God does. The Hebrew does not seem to bring this out. We read: “The preparation in the heart of man and the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.” The Hebrew word rendered “preparation,” *ma`arak*, is only found in this verse in the whole Bible. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states that the word suggests: “placing things in order” as in lining up an army for battle or arranging wood for a fire. He uses as an example: “Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) marched out and *drew up their battle lines* in the Valley of Siddim against Kedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar and Arioch king of Ellasar — four kings against five”⁴ and “Abraham built an altar there and *arranged the wood on it.*”⁵ Kidner then observes: “The meaning of the proverb is probably akin to that of verse 9, but with an

1. Gen. 6:5

2. See Rev. 20:11.

3. James 4:10

4. Gen. 14:8,9

emphasis on the fact that for all his freedom to plan, man only, in the event, advances God's designs." The Apostles confirmed this truth when they reacted to the onset of persecution in Jerusalem with their prayer: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."¹

The verse is admittedly difficult to interpret. *The New Living Translation* reads: "We can gather our thoughts, but the LORD gives the right answer," which does not throw much light upon the text. *The Living Bible's* paraphrase: "We can make our plans, but the final outcome is in God's hands" may come closer to the original intent and it definitely makes more sense.

V.2 is almost identical to a proverb in a later chapter: "All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart."² An earlier proverb narrows down the mentality of the person who believes he is doing the right thing without consulting God first. We read: "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice."³

The proverb raises the question of human freedom. If we read in it that man is not really free to plan and act because God has the right of veto, we reduce freedom to a travesty. From the creation story we understand that the first human couple was free to choose from which tree they wanted to eat the fruit. The only fence God had put around the tree of knowledge of good and evil was His Word of warning: "when you eat of it you will surely die."⁴ Physical restrictions were not enforced till after the first sin was committed and God barred the way to the tree of life by placing cherubim with flaming swords to block the way back into paradise.⁵ The restriction of our freedom is not imposed upon us by God but by sin. Jesus says: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."⁶ God does not limit us in our making plans and acting them out, but He reserves the right to control the outcome. Joseph could say to his brothers who first had planned to kill him and then sold him into slavery: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."⁷ And the Apostle Paul states: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."⁸

The Hebrew in v.2 reads: "All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the Lord weighs the spirits." The Living Bible paraphrases: "We can always 'prove' that we are right, but is the Lord convinced?" Eugene H. Peterson's *Proverbs* reads: "Humans are satisfied with whatever looks good; God probes for what is good."

A similar proverb, but with a slight variation, occurs twice in this book: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death."⁹ The statement in 16:2 is more sweeping in that it reads: "All the ways of a man..." The verse speaks about more than what we look at and our motives for looking;

5. Gen. 22:9
1. Acts 4:27,28
2. Prov. 21:2
3. Prov. 12:15
4. Gen. 2:17
5. See Gen. 3:22-24.
6. John 8:31,32, 34
7. Gen. 50:20
8. Rom. 8:28
9. Prov. 14:12; 16:25

“spirits” stands for more than “motives.” When Eve looked at the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil the fruit of which God had forbidden, she looked at it with a spirit of disobedience. When Eve picked the fruit, ate it and gave some to her husband, she made a statement of rebellion. She declared war on God. The spirit within us determines the way we look at things. Job said: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.”¹ We are all blind to our own faults, but the fact that we do see the speck of sawdust² in our brother’s eye indicates that we know how to distinguish between good and evil. It is our criticism of others that proves that the blindness of our own ways is hypocritical. After healing the man who was born blind, Jesus got into an argument with the Pharisees. We read: “Jesus said, ‘For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.’ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, ‘What? Are we blind too?’ Jesus said, ‘If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.’”³ Paul confessed: “My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.”⁴

“Whatever you do” in v.3 corresponds to “ways” in v.2. The Hebrew actually reads: “Commit your work to the Lord and your thoughts shall be established.” The Hebrew word translated “commit” is *galal*, which means: “to roll.” We find it in its literal sense in the verse: “When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would *roll* the stone *away* from the well’s mouth and water the sheep.”⁵ And it is used figuratively in: “Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have *rolled away* the reproach of Egypt from you.’ So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.”⁶ The same verb is also used in “*Cast* your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.”⁷ We recognize in the establishing of our thoughts “the peace of God” of which the Apostle Paul speaks, saying: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”⁸ Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes here: “Our activities and plans will be no less our own for being His: only less burdensome.”

Few verses in Scripture have given more fuel for controversy than v.4. The main difficulty is in the Hebrew word *ma`aneh*, which literally means “a reply.” Every other time this word is used in *The Book of Proverbs*, it is translated “answer,” as in the verse: “A gentle *answer* turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”⁹ To translate this verse: “God works out everything for an answer — even the wicked for a day of disaster” would be legitimate, although it would not make the matter much clearer. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: “The AV (*all things for himself*) is misleading; the phrase is lit. ‘everything for its answer,’ which may mean either ‘... for its purpose’ or ‘... for its counterpart.’ ... The general meaning is that there are ultimately no loose ends in God’s world: everything will be put to some use and matched with its proper fate. It does not mean that God is the author of evil.” Maybe we could say that, although evil in itself makes no sense, in making the perpetrators of evil answerable to God’s perfect standard of good, God’s dealing with evil makes sense. To use this verse to prove that God predestined some of His creatures

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1. Job 31:1
 2. See Matt. 7:1-5.
 3. John 9:39-41
 4. I Cor. 4:4
 5. Gen. 29:3
 6. Josh. 5:9
 7. Ps. 55:22
 8. Phil. 4:6,7
 9. Prov.15:1

to eternal damnation amounts to reading a meaning into it that is unwarranted. How God handles evil seems to be well illustrated in Jesus' parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."¹ Sour dough is a form of corruption but when baked in the oven it enhances the quality of the bread.

The Pulpit Commentary states about the clause "even the wicked for a day of disaster": "This clause has been perverted to support the terrible doctrine of reprobation — that God, whose will must be always efficacious, has willed the damnation of some; whereas we are taught that God's will is that 'all men should be saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth,' and that 'God sent his Son not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved' (...1 Timothy 2:4; ... John 3:17; comp. ... Ezekiel 33:11). Man, having freewill, can reject this gracious purpose of God, and render the means of salvation nugatory; but this does not make God the cause of man's destruction, but man himself. In saying that God 'made the wicked,' the writer does not mean that God made him as such, but made him as he made all other things, giving him powers and capacities which he might have used to good, but which, as a fact, he uses to evil. It will be useful here to quote the wise words of St. Gregory... 'The Just and Merciful One, as he disposes the deeds of mortals, vouchsafes some things in mercy, and permits other things in anger; and the things which he permits he so bears with that he turns them to the account of his purpose. And hence it is brought to pass in a marvelous way that even that which is done without the will of God is not contrary to the will of God. For while evil deeds are converted to a good use, the very things that oppose his design render service to his design.' "

V.5 states that pride is an abomination to God. Isaiah describes the fall of Lucifer with the words: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' "² All pride is rooted in the heart. This may mean that there are no outward manifestations, but when the root is there the plant will grow and bear its visible fruit.

The words "Be sure of this" are a translation of the Hebrew "hand join hand," which is probably an idiomatic expression. We find it also in the proverb: "Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will go free."³ *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks: "Many commentators interpret the clause as if it meant that the cooperation and combination of sinners in evil practices will not save them from retribution. But hand clasping hand in token of completing a bargain or alliance is scarcely an early Oriental custom."

6 Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.

The Hebrew reads literally: "By mercy and truth iniquity is purged and by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil." We need the context of the Bible as a whole to interpret this verse properly. We cannot make up for our sins by being loving and faithful. The Hebrew words *chesed*, "lovingkindness" and *emeth*, "truth" are divine attributes. If they are demonstrated in our behavior it is because the Holy Spirit has done His work in our hearts. The Hebrew word *kaphar*, "to cover" is the common word used to indicate that human sin is covered by the blood of a sacrificial animal. If sin is atoned for by love and faithfulness it is God's love and faithfulness, not ours. But this atonement bears fruit in that we demonstrate the fear of the Lord, that sense of reality that makes us recognize God for whom He is. Although Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, does not agree with this his conclusion is the same as ours. We read: "The second line indicates

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1. Matt. 13:33
 2. Isa. 14:13,14
 3. Prov. 11:21

that the *mercy (chesed) and truth (better, loyalty and faithfulness, RSV)* are man's here, not God's. ... This is not a denial of grace, but a characteristic demand for 'fruits that befit repentance.'

7 When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.

It is obvious that the principle expressed in this verse is not absolute in the sense that all our enemies will become our friends if we have intimate fellowship with God. Jesus seems to state the exact opposite to His disciples. On the last night of His life on earth He told them: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates me hates my Father as well."¹

The first thing that this verse implies is that if God sees Christ in our lives, people around us will see Him too. Paul expresses this in his epistle to the Corinthians: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life."² But Paul allows for a positive and a negative reaction.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "Experience proves that nothing succeeds like success. Where a man is prosperous and things go well with him, even ill-wishers are content to cast away or to dissemble their dislike, and to live at peace with him. Thus Abimelech King of Gerar fawned upon Isaac because he saw that the Lord was with him (...Genesis 26:27, etc.). This is the worldly side of the maxim. It has a higher aspect, and intimates the far reaching influence of goodness — how it disarms opposition, arouses reverence and love, gives no occasion for disputes, and spreads around an atmosphere of peace. To the Jews the maxim was taught by external circumstances. While they were doing the will of the Lord, their land was to be preserved from hostile attack (... Exodus 34:24; ... 2 Chronicles 17:10). And Christians learn that it is only when they obey and fear God that they can overcome the assaults of the enemies of their soul — the devil, the world, and the flesh."

The Hebrew word rendered "to be at peace" is *shalam*, which has the prime meaning of "to be safe." Maybe Psalm Ninety-one provides the most fitting commentary on this: "If you make the Most High your dwelling — even the LORD, who is my refuge — then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent."³

8 Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.

Adolph Hitler used to proclaim that success annuls the need to justify the means. This led to some of the most gruesome manifestations of human cruelty and decadence in world history. We may assume that he came to understand how wrong he was the moment he shot himself. Jesus, on the other hand warns us: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"⁴ If we understand thoroughly that righteousness is the basic principle that gives direction to all human action, we will avoid causing damage to our own soul and to the souls of others. How easily are we blinded by "much gain" to the point that we fight and kill to obtain it! We seldom realize that

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1. John 15:18-23
 2. II Cor. 2:15,16
 3. Ps. 91:9,10
 4. Matt. 16:26

the way we acquire things will ultimately determine whether we keep them or lose them. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on this verse: “In Prov 15:16 we are warned against gain without religion (‘the fear of the Lord’): in Prov 15:17, against gain without love to our neighbor: here, against gain ‘without right.’ ”

As we saw earlier, our sense of righteousness is related to our fear of the LORD. We read: “Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil.”¹ It is the understanding of who God is that will give us the right sense of value. When Jesus compares the worth of our soul to all the riches of the world He intimates that our soul is worth more than all else. To exchange the more valuable for the less would be the dumbest thing we could do in life.

Our problem is in our lack of contentment. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews advises: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ ”² *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* comments on the “little with righteousness”: “It carries with it more inward satisfaction, a better reputation with all that are wise and good; it will last longer, and will turn to a better account in the great day, when men will be judged, not according to what they had, but what they did.”

9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

If we look at this verse in connection with v.1 of this chapter we see that the thoughts in the two verses are parallel. There is no restriction of human liberty here. The fact that God has the last word does not mean that it is wrong for us to make plans. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word *kuwn*, translated here “determines” literally means “to be erect,” “to set up.” The idea seems to be that our plans will only be realized, will only last, if they are made in consultation with God. This thought is also expressed in an earlier proverb: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”³

10 The lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth should not betray justice.

11 Honest scales and balances are from the LORD; all the weights in the bag are of his making.

12 Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness.

13 Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth.

14 A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it.

15 When a king’s face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.

The obvious thread that ties these verses together is the person of the king: his derived authority, his sense of justice and his power. The king here is the person who reigns by the grace of God. A king has always been considered to be a symbol of divine authority. It is only in our present age that the symbol, if adhered to at all, has become meaningless. In present-day constitutional monarchies the king or queen has become a figurehead without any authority at all or with a theoretical power of veto. The king in these verses is the real king, the one David called “the LORD’s anointed.” After cutting off the slip of the mantle of Saul who went to the bathroom in the cave where David was hiding, we read: “He said to his men, ‘The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD’s anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD.’ ”⁴

1. See Prov. 15:16.

2. Heb. 13:5

3. Prov. 3:5,6

4. I Sam. 24:6

“Oracle” is the translation of the Hebrew word *qecem*, which in most cases has the pejorative meaning of “divination” or “witchcraft.” In this verse it has the positive meaning of divine authority. God imparted divine wisdom to the kings who recognized His supreme authority. Addressing the judges in Israel, we read that God said to them: “I said, ‘You are ‘gods’ ‘; you are all sons of the Most High.’ ”¹ One of David’s advisors, Ahithophel, had the reputation of possessing such divine wisdom. We read: “Now in those days the advice Ahithophel gave was like that of one who inquires of God. That was how both David and Absalom regarded all of Ahithophel’s advice.”² That, however, was the ideal which, in most cases became corrupted in practice. That is why v.10 contains the warning: “his mouth should not betray justice.”

V.11 seems to fit uncomfortably in this list of royal authority, unless we understand that moral standards are absolute. The main aspect of this verse is honesty, which is adherence to divine standards. The Romans portrayed “Justitia” as a blindfolded lady holding a pair of scales. In applying justice, the king must weigh the matters that are put before him according to the divine standards of impartiality that God expects of him. For those who tried to manipulate commerce for their own benefit, the Law of Moses stated: “Do not have two differing weights in your bag — one heavy, one light. Do not have two differing measures in your house — one large, one small. You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. For the LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.”³ We read earlier: “The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight.”⁴

It is the same standard of justice that determines moral rectitude in business that is the foundation of the royal throne. It is obvious that no monarch in the Bible or elsewhere ever lived up to the ideal set up in v.12. Most kings detest wrongdoings that are perpetrated against themselves but they are indifferent toward malpractices in the world at large. The king is supposed to model rectitude and keep his country morally on track. In doing so he will reinforce the foundation of his own reign. “For a throne is established through righteousness.” The principle applies to all who have any authority in this world. It will be revealed in all its fullness in the Messianic kingdom to come.

We notice that vv.12 and 13 speak of kings in general, using the plural. They proclaim that this is the way things ought to be, not necessarily what they are. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, suggests that these two verses portray “The king’s best interests.” We read: “These two proverbs build on the assumption that the king is in his right mind – neither deaf to conscience (12b) nor blind to truth (13b). Since most people wield authority in some direction, and are tempted to exchange the proper objects of abomination and delight, the proverb is of more than academic interest.”

Vv.14 and 15 remind us of monarchies that no longer exist in our modern western world. The only ones who have the power of life and death over their subjects are dictators as we remember some in Europe’s recent history and more recently in Asia. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, suggests a wider application by saying: “This pair of sayings may be applied, like 12, 13, to people other than kings. Most of us possess power, as here, to bring misery or happiness to certain people, almost at will, and may play the appalling role of petty tyrant.”

The best interpretation of these two verses may be in tracing the king’s authority back to the source, which is God Himself. The man or woman who reigned by the grace of God may have overstepped the boundaries of righteousness and turned into a petty tyrant, but we all must ultimately appear before the real judgment seat where we have to give account of our lives. The wise man who appeases the wrath of the king, thus saving his life, is not the one who talks smoothly and manipulatively, but the person who puts his faith

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1. Ps. 82:6
 2. II Sam. 16:23
 3. Deut. 25:13-16
 4. Prov. 11:1

in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”¹ For the fools who make no effort to appeasement, the warning of Hebrews stands: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”²

We can see a relationship between the smile on the king’s face in v.15 and the blessing the Lord wanted the Israelites to receive. We read: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: ‘ ‘The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.’ ‘ ‘So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.’ ’’³

16 How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver!

This verse is basically a repetition of the father’s advice to his son and Lady Wisdom’s words in an earlier chapter: “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold” and: “Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her. My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver.”⁴ *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes dryly: “Who believes this, though spoken by the wisest of men, under divine inspiration?”

Upon these words Jesus built His advice: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁵ Silver and gold are not treasures in the real sense of the word; they are merely means to provide nourishment, shelter and comfort. There is no innate satisfaction of the soul in precious metals.

In the conversation Jesus had with a Samaritan woman we find an illustration of this point. After having asked her for a drink of water, Jesus said to her: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” The woman thought that Jesus was poorer than she was because He did not even possess a bucket to draw water. And Jesus answered: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”⁶ Another example is found in the Apostles’ healing of a crippled beggar. We read: “Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, ‘Look at us!’ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, ‘Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.’ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.”⁷ Even if the beggar had

1. John 5:24
2. Heb. 10:31
3. Num. 6:22-27
4. Prov. 3:13,14; 8:10,11,19
5. Matt. 6:19-21
6. See John 4:10-14

been given the choice, he would not have chosen the silver or gold! Our perspective of eternity changes our system of evaluation.

17 The highway of the upright avoids evil; he who guards his way guards his life.

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

19 Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.

The highway, *mecillah* in Hebrew, is more than the road most people travel on; it is the best way to go. We find the same word in *The Book of Psalms* where it is used in the context of pilgrimage. We read: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.”¹ Darby translates this: “Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee, -- they, in whose heart are the highways.” Eugene H. Peterson renders this verse: “The road to right living bypasses evil; watch your step and save your life.”

The image does not completely represent reality in that, in traveling on any literal road on earth, we control what we are going to encounter. The highway in v.17 represents our choices more than our path through life. It is the way we put our foot on our pathway that makes our trail into a highway.

Because of our own sinful nature we cannot live a life of moral purity in our own strength. God is the One who sanctifies us.² There is a fine line between the work of God’s Spirit within us and our own responsibility. The Apostle Paul defines this clearly in his Epistle to the Romans. We read: “Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation — but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” Our duty is to allow the Holy Spirit to do His sanctifying work in us. Our natural tendency is to interfere. Guarding our way means not putting any obstacles in the path of the Spirit of God.

This truth ties v.17 to the next verse. The obstruction we put in the way of the Spirit is called “pride,” the cornerstone of original sin.

The Hebrew word, translated “haughty” in v.18, is *gobahh*, which literally means “height” in the physical sense as well as the spiritual. We find it in the verse: “A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet *tall*.”³ But also in: “In his *pride* the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.”⁴ There is in the word a suggestion of something that is originally good but turned bad because of wrong use. We all possess human dignity because of the image of God within us. When this grandeur becomes corrupted it turns into pride. The Holy Spirit seeks God’s original majesty within us and restores it to its intended splendor. Obstructing the Spirit’s work will lead to a loss of glory.

V.19 indicates that the reason for which we obstruct the Spirit’s control over us is peer pressure. Most of us will pay a high price for human recognition. Who wants to associate with the underdog? Even if we feel the urge to be socially concerned about the less privileged, we want to be known as benefactors who give a helping hand by reaching down. We do not want to be reckoned as being one of the crowd. We make elaborate schemes to reach our goal in human society, even using pious means. Jesus ridiculed the Pharisees’ prayers, saying: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell

7. Acts 3:2-8

1. Ps. 84:5

2. See Lev. 20:8.

3. I Sam. 17:4

4. Ps. 10:4

you the truth, they have received their reward in full.”¹ Seeking human recognition is incompatible with being recognized by God. Jesus also said: “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”²

Ironically, we will find God when we identify with the oppressed. This will become clear at the time of Jesus’ return in glory to earth. We read: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”³ Humility will help us to keep things in perspective.

20 Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.

21 The wise in heart are called discerning, and pleasant words promote instruction.

22 Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools.

23 A wise man’s heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction.

24 Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

The parallel in v.20 indicates that it is to the Lord’s instruction we must pay attention. These five verses put learning, wisdom, insight and speech in the context of trust in God. The blessing our relationship with God will yield is expressed in terms of material well-being, but previous statements about the relative value of silver and gold help us to understand that more is meant here than affluence and physical health.

The KJV renders this “He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good” taking the secondary meaning of the Hebrew word *dabar*, rather than the primary one. The more recent interpretation of *dabar* is “a matter spoken of.”

The verse also implies that obedience and trust go together. The object of our trust in this context is particularly the fact that God knows infinitely more than we do. In obeying instructions we recognize Him as the highest authority. The expression “give heed to instruction” suggests a spirit of obedience as opposed to a spirit of rebellion, which is what we are born with. We will only demonstrate a spirit of obedience if there has been an act of surrender on our part.

The author of Proverbs calls this spirit ‘wisdom’ and he intimates that this will give us a testimony to people around us. “Are called discerning” means that others will call us discerning, people who have *biyn*, who are able to distinguish between good and evil. It is the keyword in the whole *Book of Proverbs*, found at the very threshold of the book. “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for *understanding* words of insight...”⁴

“Blessed” is a keyword in The Book of Psalms. It is the word that opens the hymnal: “Blessed is the man ...”⁵ It is found thirty-seven times in the Psalms, if I counted correctly, and fourteen times in Proverbs. And in most cases blessing does not imply material fortitude. “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him”⁶ is more indicative of the condition that favors blessing. God’s blessing is first of all spiritual.

1. Matt. 6:1,5

2. John 5:44

3. Matt. 25:34-36

4. See Prov. 1:1,2.

5. Ps. 1:1

6. See Ps. 32:1,2

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes about v.21: “This proverb, and more plainly verse 23, speaks of the impression which true wisdom cannot fail to make. The wise man (not necessarily the clever one) will get known (a) for his discerning eye (AV: *prudent*) and (b) for his telling speech (21b,23). Those who lack judgment or who talk above their hearers’ heads need not pine for recognition; only for wisdom.”

The Hebrew words translated “fountain of life” are *maqowr chay*. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* calls it: “another allusion to the artery that carries the blood from the heart to distribute it to all the extremities of the body.” We find the expression five times in *The Book of Proverbs*.¹

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on v.22: “As ‘understanding’ or intelligence is its own reward to its possessors, so ‘folly’ is its own punishment to fools. Or, taking the English version, All ‘the instruction (i.e., the wisdom) of fools is (nothing but) folly;’ it is ‘a well-spring’ of folly, and therefore of death (the opposite to ‘of life’). Water cannot rise above its level. Not only in serious concerns does the wise man’s ‘understanding’ well forth, but even in his moments of relaxation. The fool’s wisdom, not only in ordinary concerns, but even in serious ones; as, for instance, his efforts by way of ‘instruction’ betray his ‘folly.’ ”

V.23 traces the heart as the source of words of wisdom. It is obvious that this cannot be a reference to the unregenerate heart. We use the expression “speaking from the heart” as an indication that words are filled with feeling and emotion. The heart is the control center of man. Wisdom is knowledge that moved from the head to the heart. There may be emotional involvement but that is not the issue. Jesus says: “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him,”² indicating that it depends on the condition of the human heart what comes out of the mouth. Paul refers to the new heart of the born again person, when he writes: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”³

The NIV, in a footnote, gives the alternate reading for v. 23b, “and his lips promote instruction,” “and makes his lips persuasive.”

The Hebrew word rendered “pleasant” in v.24 is *no`am*, which has the meaning of “beauty.” We find it in the verse: “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the *beauty* of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”⁴ God’s holiness is expressed in light and beauty. When John had a vision of God he wrote: “there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.”⁵

Words of wisdom give us a taste of God’s glory. Solomon compares the experience to eating of wild honey. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Honey in Palestine is a staple article of food, and is also used as a medicinal remedy. Of its reviving effects we read in the case of Jonathan, who from a little portion hurriedly taken as he marched on had ‘his eyes enlightened’ (...1 Samuel 14:27).” The image may have lost some of its meaning in our modern calorie-conscious society, but we can still experience the tonic-like effect the Word of God as an expression of beauty has on our soul and body. We cannot, in David’s words, “gaze upon the beauty of the LORD” and wither away spiritually and emotionally at the same time.

25 There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

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1. See Prov. 10:11; 13:14; 14:27; 16:22 and 18:4.
 2. Matt. 12:34b,35
 3. Col. 3:16
 4. Ps. 27:4
 5. Rev. 4:2,3

This is an exact repeat of a previous proverb.¹ As mentioned in connection with the first appearance of the proverb, our concept of what is morally right must be tested to God's measure of righteousness. The repetition may be for the purpose of drilling into us the need for looking to God for guidance. It is hazardous to give the example of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in connection with this. God's apparent demand that Abraham bring a human sacrifice strove against the very character of God; yet that is what God asked Abraham to do. Had Abraham consulted his own concept of what is right, he would have refused.

26 The laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on.

The New King James Version sticks closer to the Hebrew: "The person who labors, labors for himself, For his hungry mouth drives him on." The Living Bible reads: "Hunger is good-if it makes you work to satisfy it!" That is probably the best interpretation of the thought the verse wants to express. The Hebrew uses the word *nephesh*, actually reading "the soul that labors..." This does not necessarily require that we spiritualize the verse, but we may safely conclude that what is good for the body is also good for the soul.

As human beings we need stimuli. Hunger and thirst can be the undoing of man if no food and drink is available. But without the built-in warnings we might not recognize our needs and neglect ourselves. God created us in such a way that we must satisfy our basic needs. Labor in itself is also a blessing. The fact that sin made labor into painful toil and that we must eat our food by the sweat of our brow² does not mean that physical activity and exercise are curses in themselves. The Bible in general and *The Book of Proverbs* in particular condemn laziness.

Without hunger and thirst of our soul we would never enter into a life-giving relationship with God. The sons of Korah sang: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"³ And David wrote: "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."⁴

Sin not only made labor into painful toil; it also tends to kill our appetite, which leads to self-destruction. Jesus pronounced His blessing upon hunger and thirst for righteousness.⁵ *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments: "If we make religion our business, God will make it our blessedness." Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, quotes John Knox: "No better friend drudgery has than appetite; hunger drives a man to his task." Kidner adds: "This is welcome realism (*cf.* 2 Thess. 3:10-12), though it is not the last word on incentives: *cf.* Ephesians 4:28; 6:7." These verses read: "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.' We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat." "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need." And: "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men."

27 A scoundrel plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.

28 A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.

29 A violent man entices his neighbor and leads him down a path that is not good.

1. See Prov. 14:12

2. Gen. 3:17,19

3. Ps. 42:1,2

4. Ps. 63:1. See also Ps. 143:6.

5. Matt. 5:6

30 He who winks with his eye is plotting perversity; he who purses his lips is bent on evil.

These verses deal with a person who is called “a scoundrel,” “perverse” and “violent.” V.27 reads in Hebrew: “An ungodly man digs up evil: and in his lips there is a fire.” The word “scoundrel” or “ungodly” is the translation of the Hebrew word *beliya`al*, which Paul uses as an equivalent for Satan: “What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?”¹ The strong suggestion in the wording of this verse is that Satan manipulates evil people and that he controls their plans and their speech. The fact that the person who stands in a direct relationship with the prince of darkness digs up evil indicates that evil ought to be buried in the ground. This exhuming of corruption is done by the vocabulary the person uses. James may have had this verse in mind when he wrote: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”²

These verses depict the scope of evil and its contagious character. Satan uses human beings to break up friendships and lead the neighbor we are supposed to love as ourselves to hell. The best way to look at these verses is to turn them around and say: “If this is the result of selling one’s soul to the devil what will happen if one turns over his life to the control of the Holy Spirit?” Surrender to the love of God will keep evil six foot under ground where it belongs. It will make our tongue a member of the body of Christ. It will create a fellowship of love where we do love our neighbor as ourselves. It will turn people around who are on their way to hell and bring them into God’s kingdom. It will change our body language and make us express in ways that are beyond our control that the love of God lives within us.

31 Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life.

This verse has nothing to do with hair. “Gray hair” stands here for old age. *The King James Version* inserts the word “if” in the second part of the verse, but “if” is not in the Hebrew text. It is obvious, however, that age in itself has little to do with crowns of righteousness. Some people grow old sinning. *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* comments on this verse: “If old people be found in the way of righteousness, their age will be their honor. Old age, as such, is honorable, and commands respect (Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, Lev 19:32); but, if it be found in the way of wickedness, its honor is forfeited, its crown profaned and laid in the dust, Isa 65:20. Old people therefore, if they would preserve their honor, must still hold fast their integrity, and then their gray hairs are indeed a crown to them; they are worthy of double honor. Grace is the glory of old age.” *The Pulpit Commentary* adds: “It is well said in the Book of Wisdom (4, 5, etc.), “Honorable age is not that which stands in length of time, nor that is measured by number of years. But wisdom is the gray hair unto men, and an unspotted life is old age.

The Hebrew word rendered “splendor” is *tiph’arah*, which is derived from a word meaning “ornament.” We find the same word in the verse “Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him *dignity* and honor.”³

32 Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.

Patience and self-control are the fruit of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Our sinful nature has disturbed the system God installed in Adam and Eve by which the human spirit controls the soul and governs the workings of the body. In our sinful condition our body dictates our desires and our spirit hibernates. That is the reason we become aggressive and seek control over that which is outside us. We direct the anger we feel against

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1. II Cor. 6:15
 2. James 3:6
 3. Ex. 28:2
 4. See Gal. 5:22,23.

ourselves toward others. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes correctly: "It is much easier to subdue an enemy without than one within." And another proverb states: "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control."¹ James traces our lack of self-control to our inability to listen. We read: "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."² The real hero is the person who is victorious over himself. Jacob, in his struggle at Peniel, in which he asked God to be gracious to him, became Israel, because he was victorious over his own sinful nature.³

33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

In order to understand this proverb correctly we must keep it in its Old Testament context. Its message has nothing to do with chance or with the modern system of lottery or sweepstake. It does not give us a license to buy a ticket and pray that God would make us win a prize. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: "The Old Testament use of the word lot shows that this proverb (and 18:18) is not about God's control of all random occurrences, but about His settling of matters properly referred to Him. Land was 'allotted' (Jos. 14:1,2), likewise temple service (I Ch. 25:8); probably the Urim and Thummim were lots. But God's last use of this method was, significantly, the last event before Pentecost (Acts 1:26); thereafter He has no longer guided His church as a 'servant' who 'knoweth not what his lord doeth'; cf. Acts 13:2; 15:25,28."

There also seems to be a suggestion in this verse that God overrules man's intent in the way He did in the life of Joseph.⁴ "That in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."⁵

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary explains: "The Torah knows only in one instance an ordeal (a judgment of God) as a right means of proof, Num 5:12-31. The lot is nowhere ordained by it, but its use is supported by a custom running parallel with the Mosaic law; it was used not only in private life, but also in manifold ways within the domain of public justice, as well as for the detection of the guilty, Josh 7:14 f., 1 Sam 14:40-42. So that the proverb Prov 18:18 says the same thing of the lot that is said in the Epistle to the Heb 6:16, of the oath. The above proverb also explains the lot for an ordeal, for it is God who directs and orders it that it fall out thus and not otherwise. A particular sanction of the use of the lot does not lie in this, but it is only said, that where the lot is cast, all the decision that results from it is determined by God. That is in all cases true; but whether the challenging of the divine decision in such a way be right in this or that case is a question, and in no case would one, on the contrary, venture to make the person of the transgressor discoverable by lot, and let it decide regarding human life."

7. Chapter Seventeen

1 Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.

The Hebrew text reads: "Better is a dry morsel and quietness therewith, than a house full of sacrifices with strife." The "sacrifice" here, *zebach* in Hebrew, is primarily the fellowship offering or peace offering in Leviticus of which the person who brought the sacrifice could partake himself with his family.⁶

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1. Prov. 25:28
 2. James 1:19,20
 3. See Gen. 32:24-32; Hos. 12:4.
 4. See Gen. 50:20.
 5. See Rom. 8:28.
 6. See Lev. Chapters 3 and 7.

The message of this proverb contains a good amount of irony. This is not about unhappy rich people who overeat and poor people who are satisfied.¹ The peace offering that is brought to celebrate peace with God is supposed to promote peace with one another, especially in the bonds of family, but it does not always. We read in the story of the birth of Samuel how Peninnah, who had sons and daughters, provoked Hannah, who was barren, in order to irritate her, particularly during the eating of the peace offering meal.²

This proverb seems to emphasize the truth that peace with God must be demonstrated in a practical way in making peace with fellow humans. Peter writes: “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”³ And the Apostle John adds: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”⁴

2 A wise servant will rule over a disgraceful son, and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers.

The servant in this verse is *‘ebed* in Hebrew, which is the ordinary word for “slave.” We find the same word in the curse Noah pronounced over his Canaan, Ham’s son: “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.”⁵ The “disgraceful son” is *ben meebiysh*, the son that causes shame to the family name. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, writes above this verse: “Ability outruns privilege.” We have no Biblical examples that prove that slaves who demonstrated wisdom were adopted as sons in the family and ended up ranking higher than the firstborn in the family. But we have Jesus’ promise that He will make us, who were slaves of sin, into members of the family of God. He says: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”⁶ The Apostle Paul adds to this: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”⁷

The original ironic lesson to be drawn from this proverb seems to be that God’s wisdom mocks social status to which we pay so much attention in our society. He uses those we consider to be the lowest in the pecking order to extricate those who form the upper crust of society. Yea, in order to bring about the salvation of the world, Jesus came as a slave. He came to the land of Canaan in a form lower than Canaan who had incurred the wrath of Noah’s curse. He said to His disciples: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”⁸

3 The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart.

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1. See Luke 16:19-31.
 2. See I Sam. 1:4-8
 3. I Peter 1:22,23
 4. I John 4:20,21
 5. Gen. 9:25
 6. John 8:34-36
 7. Rom. 8:16,17
 8. Matt. 20:25-28

The image that compares what God does to the human heart to the testing of precious metals occurs several times in Scripture. Malachi puts it in the context of the Day of Judgment and Peter presents it as a process that goes on in our daily life. We read: “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.”¹ And in Peter we read: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”² In *The Book of Proverbs* itself we find the picture repeated against different backgrounds: “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives.”³ “Remove the dross from the silver, and out comes material for the silversmith; remove the wicked from the king’s presence, and his throne will be established through righteousness.”⁴

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “The second line by itself would make God only an examiner; but the first line implies that His trials are constructive: not for finding a person out but for sorting him out. When things reveal their relative worth under ‘fiery trial,’ it is our part (since we are not inert metal) to pick out, with Him, ‘the precious from the worthless’ (see Je. 15:19), for the benefit is not automatic (Je. 6:29,30). The verses quoted read: “Therefore this is what the LORD says: ‘If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them.’ ”⁵ And: “The bellows blow fiercely to burn away the lead with fire, but the refining goes on in vain; the wicked are not purged out. They are called rejected silver, because the LORD has rejected them.”⁶

It is important to understand the implication of the process in our daily life of communion with the Lord. Our natural and immediate reaction to the fire God permits in our life is usually negative. We believe that what happens to us is wrong and we want God to stop the pain of what He is doing to us. Peter states: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”⁷ James puts it even more forcefully: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”⁸

4 A wicked man listens to evil lips; a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue.

5 He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished.

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1. Mal. 3:2-4
 2. I Peter 1:6,7
 3. Prov. 27:21
 4. Prov. 25:4,5

 5. Jer. 15:19
 6. Jer. 6:29,30
 7. I Peter 4:12,13
 8. James 1:2-4

Although these two verses are not directly related, we find the same thread of wickedness running through them. We are tempted to brush off the first statement by considering ourselves above gossip and lying, but even a minimum amount of self-knowledge and honesty will make us confess that crime does have a certain attraction to all of us and we find relaxation in looking at television shows that portray murder. Satan finds in each of us a sounding board for his whisperings. If Eve had been immune to temptation we would live in a different world today. Ever since our first parents made their choice for experimental knowledge of good and evil instead of for life, we inherited a nature that responds easily to evil lips and malicious tongues. Our reaction to evil proves our lack of love because in Paul's words: "[Love] keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth."¹

A previous proverb gives us an almost identical reading: "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God." V.5 penetrates deeper into the wickedness of our attitude toward our fellowmen. The last part of the verse indicates that there was a disaster that caused the poverty of the person on whom the beam focuses here. The point Solomon wants to make here is our reaction to calamity that strikes someone else. A mild, though negative, response would be a sense of relief that it hit him instead of us. The barrage of tragedy that is poured out upon us by the media that cover world news tends to make us insensitive to worldwide suffering. If we receive this warning from this verse, we do well.

We must understand that reacting indifferently to disaster that strikes others puts us on a slippery slope that can easily bring us to the point of callousness where we mock our Creator in the lives of others. The Hebrew word that describes the reaction to disaster in others is *sameach*, or *samach*, which generally has a positive meaning. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* states: "Samach usually refers to a spontaneous emotion or extreme happiness which is expressed in some visible and or external manner. It does not normally represent an abiding state of well-being or feeling." The question, therefore, is how do we react spontaneously, that is without having time to determine what attitude we ought to display, to earthquakes, floods, hurricanes that kill and maim people next-door and around the world? Unless the love of Christ has taken possession of our lives, we will find ourselves mocking our Creator. Our negligence can have far reaching consequences. If we do not recognize our Maker in our fellowmen we seal our own doom. It was to those who said to the king: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" that Jesus says: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."²

6 Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children.

The angle of vision in this verse is the viewpoint of the second and third generation. The Bible displays both points of view: There is emphasis on parents' responsibility to their children and grandchildren and there is a reminder to the next generation to look back to the previous one with respect. Although this is not specifically stated there is a suggestion of maturing relationships. Most parents have children before they become aged. It is when children grow up and become adult and parents begin to relate to their children as adults toward adults that they receive their crown.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary comments on this verse: "They are so, that is, they should be so, and, if they conduct themselves worthily, they are so. 1. It is an honor to parents when they are old to leave children, and children's children, growing up, that tread in the steps of their virtues, and are likely to maintain and advance the reputation of their families. It is an honor to a man to live so long as to see his children's children (Ps 128:6; Gen 50:23), to see his house built up in them, and to see them likely to serve their generation according to the will of God. This crowns and completes their comfort in this world. 2. It is

1. I Cor. 13:5^b,6.

2. See Matt. 25:41-46.

an honor to children to have wise and godly parents, and to have them continued to them even after they have themselves grown up and settled in the world. Those are unnatural children who reckon their aged parents a burden to them, and think they live too long; whereas, if the children be wise and good, it is as much their honor as can be that thereby they are comforts to their parents in the unpleasant days of their old age.”

It needs no comment that this verse describes an ideal condition that is not always present in real life. The world is replete with abusive parents and there are abused children who cannot look back upon a happy and healthy youth.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, calls this verse “Harmony of age and youth.” He writes: These fine family fruits need cultivating and protecting. A neglected crop, riddled with mutual antipathy, is seen in Isaiah 3:5; Micah 7:6; 2 Timothy 3:2-4.” The quoted verses read: “People will oppress each other — man against man, neighbor against neighbor. The young will rise up against the old, the base against the honorable.”¹ “For a son dishonors his father, a daughter rises up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — a man’s enemies are the members of his own household.”² “People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”³

7 Arrogant lips are unsuited to a fool — how much worse lying lips to a ruler!
8 A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds.

The Hebrew in v.7 reads: “Excellent speech becomes not a fool: much less do lying lips a prince.” The Hebrew word rendered “excellent” is *yether*, which literally means “overhanging,” or “excess.” We find the word used in the announcement of the eighth plague over Egypt, the plague of locusts. Moses said to Pharaoh: “They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour *what little you have left* after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields.”⁴ The Hebrew expression may be idiomatic. *The Pulpit Commentary* states that “a lip of excess” can best be taken in the sense of arrogant or pretentious. We read: *A nabal*, a ‘vicious fool, ought not to flaunt his unwisdom and his iniquities before the eyes of men, but to keep them hidden as much as possible. As such presumptuous behavior is incongruous in the case of a fool, much less do lying lips [become] a prince; a noble person, such a one as is called in Isaiah (... Isaiah 32:8) ‘liberal,’ where the same word, *nadib*, is used. This is an illustration of the saying, ‘Noblesse oblige.’”

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, adds to this: “The contrast between [the fool] and the prince (*nadib*) or, better, ‘nobleman,’ is clarified in Isaiah 32:5-8, where both words occur, and nobility is made a title to be lived up to.” Isaiah 32:5-8 reads: “No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be highly respected. For the fool speaks folly, his mind is busy with evil: He practices ungodliness and spreads error concerning the LORD; the hungry he leaves empty and from the thirsty he withholds water. The scoundrel’s methods are wicked, he makes up evil schemes to destroy the poor with lies, even when the plea of the needy is just. But the noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands.”

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this verse: “We don’t expect eloquence from fools, nor do we expect lies from our leaders.”

The Hebrew text of v.8 reads: “A gift is as a precious stone in the eyes of him that has it: whithersoever it turns it prospers.” It is obvious that the writer of these words merely states a fact without

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1. Isa. 3:5
 2. Mic. 7:6
 3. II Tim. 3:2-4
 4. Ex. 10:5

recommending the practice. V.23 in the same chapter states: “A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice.” Some Bible scholars interpret the text positively. Eugene H. Peterson, for instance translates: “Receiving a gift is like getting a rare gemstone; any way you look at it, you see beauty refracted.” *The Revised Standard Version* reads: “A bribe is like a magic stone in the eyes of him who gives it; wherever he turns he prospers.” *The Living Bible*: “A bribe works like magic. Whoever uses it will prosper!” But this kind of prosperity must not be confused with the Lord’s blessing.

9 He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

This is not about corruption of justice as was stated in the previous verse. This verse speaks about preservation of love and friendship. There are no perfect human relationships in this world. If we allow our sensitivities to rule our friendships, we will not have any friends and we all need friends. Love demonstrates itself in the way we handle friction. Without that understanding, marriages break up and friendships dissolve. We have the ultimate model of God’s dealing with our offenses. The Apostle John states: “We love because he first loved us.”¹ And Paul writes: “It keeps no record of wrongs.”² Jesus taught us to pray: “and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.”³ Peter may have had this in mind when he wrote: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”⁴

The covering up, evidently, refers to keeping silent about a matter, as is clear from the second part of the proverb. The closeness of a friendship is preserved in the preservation of its secrets.

10 A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool.

11 An evil man is bent only on rebellion; a merciless official will be sent against him.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, gives us the refreshing paraphrase: “A quiet rebuke to a person of good sense does more than a whack on the head of a fool.” V.10 indicates that the covering up in the previous verse does not imply that all insults should be taken lying down. Not repeating a matter pertains to those outside the circle of intimacy. In honest friendships revealing hurts reinforces the bond. But v.10 focuses more on the person who offended than upon the one who is hurt. *The Septuagint* renders this verse: “A threat breaks the heart of a prudent man; a fool even scourged feels it not.”

The “man of discernment” is the person of *biyn* of which we observed that it may be the most important word in *The Book of Proverbs* since it occurs more than thirty times in the book. It is that part of wisdom that allows us to see the difference between good and evil. It recognizes what is from God and what comes from the enemy of our soul.

The Hebrew word rendered “rebellion” is *meriy*, which is derived from a word meaning “bitterness.” In most cases it is translated “rebellion,” but in *The Book of Job* we find it in the sense of bitterness when Job says: “Even today my complaint is *bitter*; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.”⁵ It is the evil in man’s soul that makes him rebel against his circumstances. Instead of recognizing that God treats us as His sons when He disciplines us, the rebel resists and kicks against the pricks. An example of the opposite attitude is that of Paul and Silas who prayed and sang God’s praises after they had been severely flogged and put in prison.⁶

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1. I John 4:19
 2. I Cor. 13:5
 3. Matt. 6:12 (NLT)
 4. I Peter 4:8
 5. Job 23:3
 6. See Acts 16:24,25.

The messenger sent to the rebel is called *mal'ak* in Hebrew. The word is often used to denote an angel, as in “The *angel* of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.”¹ An evil angel would be a demon. He who resists God’s discipline that would lead to salvation and sanctification opens himself up to satanic attacks.

12 Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool in his folly.

13 If a man pays back evil for good, evil will never leave his house.

14 Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, gives v.12 the heading “Fool on the prowl.” The verse compares the danger of foolishness with meeting a bear robbed of her cubs and decides that the latter is the lesser. Our immediate reaction to this statement would be to disagree. We would rather face the man than the bear. The point Solomon wants to make is obviously that we underestimate the seriousness of folly, that is the silliness that refuses to take God’s demands seriously. Foolishness, *ivveleth* in Hebrew, is another keyword in *The Book of Proverbs*; it is found at least twenty-three times. It is the attitude that treats God’s warnings as a joke, as did the sons-in-law of Lot.² Jesus warns us to take God seriously and to fear more than anything else “the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”³

The warning in v.13 is directed at the fool, as in v.12 it was given to the wise person. We harvest what we sow. The suggestion seems to be that even a small act of unrighteousness will result in a catastrophic return of dividend. We rightfully use the expression “fall into sin” because sin constitutes a fall. Once we begin to fall we cannot control the outcome. If we fall from a skyscraper we may feel good for one hundred or eighty stories; it is hitting the ground that will kill us.

V.14 continues the warning that evil acts, however small they may seem, make us lose control. World wars have been started over comparatively minor issues. The story of the little Dutch boy who saved the country by holding his finger in the dike is a myth. Dam breaks always begin with little cracks. Jesus advises us: “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”⁴

15 Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent — the LORD detests them both.

This verse leads us into a court of law in which justice is made a travesty. The suggestion is that the wrong kind of verdict is pronounced knowingly. It is not a matter of misinterpretation of circumstantial evidence, but a deliberate wrong use of justice. Some translations try to give a broader interpretation to the text. *The Living Bible*, for instance, paraphrases: “The Lord despises those who say that bad is good and good is bad.” And Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, reads: “Whitewashing bad people and throwing mud on good people are equally abhorrent to God.” But it seems better to keep the verse within the context of judicial practice. There is a strong smell of bribery in this verse. In modern times we have seen it applied in politically motivated kangaroo courts, as in communists countries or under Nazism.

The Hebrew words used are *tsadaq* for “justify” and *rasha* for “condemn.” The Mosaic law strongly condemned the practice: “Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.”⁵ Yet, it seems that God did exactly what He

1. Gen. 16:7

2. See Gen. 19:14.

3. Matt. 10:28

4. Matt. 5:39-42

condemns here. We read: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”¹ We find *tsedaqah*, a word similar to *tsadaq* in this verse. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “This verse shows that the term ‘justify’ (Hebrew, *matsdiyq*) is forensic, to pronounce just one, even though not just in himself: a key-word in the doctrinal Epistle to the Romans: the opposite of ‘condemn,’ or pronounce impious (*mareshia*).” In Jesus Christ, God condemned the innocent and justified the guilty to which we owe our salvation. Divine justice supersedes human justice but it does not abolish it. It is on the basis of our own justification by grace that we are enabled to apply justice among ourselves.

The Apostle Paul explains that it was God’s justice that made God do that which seems unjust to us. We read: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”²

16 Of what use is money in the hand of a fool, since he has no desire to get wisdom?

Does this mean that wisdom is for sale? Or does it condemn the way we use our money? Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases: “What is this? Fools out shopping for wisdom! They wouldn’t recognize it if they saw it!” One of the best illustrations of what Solomon is saying here is in the story of Simon, the magician. We read: “When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the Apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, ‘Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ Peter answered: ‘May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.’ Then Simon answered, ‘Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.’”³

It helps us to understand if we substitute “power” for “money.” After all, in human society money is not merely a means of sustenance; it is a surrogate for authority and influence. Wisdom is to fear God and surrender to Him. It leaves all human tendencies to manipulate out of the picture.

17 A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

18 A man lacking in judgment strikes hands in pledge and puts up security for his neighbor.

19 He who loves a quarrel loves sin; he who builds a high gate invites destruction.

20 A man of perverse heart does not prosper; he whose tongue is deceitful falls into trouble.

Although these verses do not seem to have much in common, there is a common thread running through them. They all speak of the role love plays in human relations. V.17 portrays friendship as a constant in changing circumstances. V.18 sets limits to the area in which neighborly love operates. V.19 takes a second look at those limits and emphasizes the fact that love operates in a sinful and dangerous world. V.20 warns against the corruption of love.

5. Ex. 23:7

1. Gen. 15:6

2. Rom. 3:21-26

3. Acts 8:18-24

The important words in v.17 are “at all times” and “adversity.” Friendships often thrive in prosperity and die off when hardship strikes. The prodigal son is a point in case. When his money was gone so were his friends. True love loves regardless of circumstances. The “brother” is no blood relation in this verse. He is the friend who becomes a brother because of adverse circumstances. *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* suggests that friendships that cannot take adversity are better lost than kept. We read: “Those that are fanciful or selfish in their friendship will love no longer than their humor is pleased and their interest served, and therefore their affections turn with the wind and change with the weather. Swallow-friends, that fly to you in summer, but are gone in winter; such friends there is no loss of.”

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, the Septuagint reads: “Have thou a friend for every crisis, and let brethren be useful in adversities; for for this they are made.” The same commentary quotes Wordsworth who remarks: “Adversity brings him forth. He comes, as it were, out of the womb of calamity, and seems to be born for it.”

We find a supplement to this verse in the next chapter: “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”¹ We do well to remember Jesus’ words to us: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”²

V.18 does not discourage generosity. The Bible promises blessing to generous people. “Good will come to him who is generous and lends freely, who conducts his affairs with justice.”³ And Jesus seems to suggest that we must not resist people who take advantage of us. “And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”⁴ But our verse speaks about getting involved with people who are running up debts. Eugene E. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, turns this verse around and makes it apply to the person who helps instead of the one who asks for help. We read: “It’s stupid to try to get something for nothing, or run up huge bills you can never pay.” That may be a good application for people in our modern western world in a capitalistic society, but that is not what Proverbs states.

In an earlier chapter the father issued a strong warning to his son who lacked experience in the world of business. We read: “My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, if you have struck hands in pledge for another, if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, to free yourself, since you have fallen into your neighbor’s hands: Go and humble yourself; press your plea with your neighbor! Allow no sleep to your eyes, no slumber to your eyelids. Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler.”⁵ Exercise of neighborly love does not require that we encourage others to be irresponsible in their lifestyle. We live in a world that is replete with prowlers and conmen who are out to take advantage of naïve people. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “Luther takes it, If you wish to help your friend, be surety for him, but not in his presence, which will increase his negligence. The believer is worse than a pagan, if he is not provident for his own household (1 Tim 5:8). So close is the connection of prudence in the household with prudence in religious concerns in general, that the two generally stand or fall together.” And *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “What is here censured is the weakness which, for the sake of perhaps worthless companions, lets itself be hampered and endangered by others’ obligations. For, as our adage runs, he that is surety for another is never sure himself.”

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1. Prov. 18:24
 2. John 15:15
 3. Ps. 112:5
 4. Matt. 5:40-42
 5. Prov. 6:1-5

V.19 seems to issue a warning in the other direction. The high gate symbolizes isolation, shutting oneself up to the needs of others. The Hebrew text has some hidden irony in it. The Hebrew word for “sin” here is *pesha`*, which means “transgression,” or “trespass.” Taken literally, this means that the person who does not mind intruding upon other people’s territory erects high fences around his own property to keep others out. Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases: “The person who courts sin, marries trouble; build a wall, invite a burglar.”

V.20 traces the quarrel and the fence of the previous verse back to the source, that is to the human heart. The Hebrew word used to describe the heart’s condition is *iqqesh*, which means “distorted,” “crooked,” or “perverse.” Jesus said: “The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”¹ Perversity is the distortion of the image of God in us. If we are restored inwardly by the work of grace the Holy Spirit performs in us, we will love God with all that is in us and our neighbor as ourselves. We will demonstrate that brotherly love that provides real help to the neighbor in need. Walls of separation will be torn down in Christ and our tongue will be an instrument of healing instead of a sharp double-edged sword. As the Apostle Paul states: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”²

21 To have a fool for a son brings grief; there is no joy for the father of a fool.

22 A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

Both verses speak of joy and sorrow. The Hebrew text of v.21 is more expressive than the NIV’s rendering. “He that begets a fool does it to his sorrow: and no father has joy of a fool.” The Hebrew uses two different words for “fool.” The first one is *keciyl*, which actually means “fat,” suggesting laziness. The second word is *nabal*, which means “wicked.” The problem is, of course, that the father who begets cannot know what kind of person his child will be. Wise parents will pray the Lord not to give them any children unless the children will be persons who fear the Lord and live a life that glorifies Him. Only God knows what kind of person grows in the mother’s womb and if we consult the Creator before conception occurs we demonstrate that we are wise ourselves.

It remains true, however, that spirituality is not inheritable. Godly parents have produced rebellious children. Whether one follows the Lord or not is, ultimately, a personal choice. Parents cannot always be blamed for the bad behavior of their children, nor can they take credit for having spiritual offspring. But God can do more for our children in any stage of their lives than we often allow Him to do.

God wants children to be the joy of their parents. If such is not the case the heartache is beyond description. A Dutch poet wrote: “The little ones trample the robe, the older the heart.”

The father-son relationship is quite prominent throughout Proverbs. It is modeled for us in the Trinity of the Godhead. Jesus made it flesh and blood for us during His life on earth. Jesus Christ shows us what a father ought to be and how a son can relate to his parents.

23 A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice.

The Hebrew reads literally: “A wicked man takes a gift out of the bosom to pervert the ways of judgment.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, renders it: “The wicked takes bribes under the table; they show nothing but contempt for justice.” This verse is the twin of v.8 where the statement was made without the drawing a moral lesson. V.8 focused on the person who offers the bribe, and who hopes that it will work in his favor; in this verse the light shines on the one who receives it. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The judges had no appointed salaries; hence the unprincipled among them were open to bribery.”

1. Matt. 15:18,19

2. Eph. 2:14

It is understood that the tribes who appointed them were responsible to pay the judges. We read in Deuteronomy: “Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.”¹ God had linked Israel’s possession of the land to their integrity. The law warned against bribery. “Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous.”² It takes at least two persons who lose their integrity for bribery to exist. Living in Southeast Asia, we experienced the pressure of a system of corruption, where it was nigh to impossible to get through customs or get paperwork done without greasing someone’s palm. As a mission society we had to maintain a reputation of making no payments under the table.

24 A discerning man keeps wisdom in view, but a fool’s eyes wander to the ends of the earth.

This proverb contains no condemnation to explorers and discoverers; it deals with man’s search for truth. The discerning man is the person who has *biyn*, the prominent word in *The Book of Proverbs* which describes the analytical mind that distinguishes between good and evil.

Solomon must have had Moses’ words in mind: “Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”³ The Apostle Paul adds to this: “That is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’”⁴

We conclude from the above that wisdom consists in confessing Jesus as Lord of one’s life and in believing that death has been conquered in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we do not find this truth at home, we will not find it at the ends of the earth either. And if we have found it, we will see that it remains true at the ends of the earth and even in the farthest corners of the universe.

25 A foolish son brings grief to his father and bitterness to the one who bore him.

This verse is linked to v.21 where the father was the point of focus. Here the beam points to the son who causes the grief more than on the father who experiences it.

Grief is the translation of the Hebrew word *ka`ac*, which has the meaning of “anger,” or “indignation.” We find it used of the wrath of God in the verse: “Restore us, O God of our salvation, And cause Your anger toward us to cease.”⁵ Bitterness is the rendering of the Hebrew *memer*. This is the only place in the whole Old Testament where this word is found. The child’s way of living causes anger and bitterness in the heart of the parents.

The Apostle Paul covers both sides of the spectrum when he states: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’-which is the first commandment with a promise—

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1. Deut. 16:18-20
 2. Ex. 23:8
 3. Deut. 30:11-14
 4. Rom. 10:8-11
 5. Ps. 85:4 (NKJV)

‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”¹ Solomon warns children not to exasperate their parents. Nobody ever had perfect parents and no parent ever had perfect children. Every child must learn to accept his or her parents’ idiosyncrasies. Just as parents are obligated to respect their children’s own personality, children are under obligation to love their parents, even those that are not lovable. Those who do not do so are qualified as “fools.” It is, of course, important that parents make sure they are lovable.

26 It is not good to punish an innocent man, or to flog officials for their integrity.

The Hebrew text reads: “Also not good is to punish the just nor to strike the princes for equity.” The word “also,” which is lacking in most modern translations, seems to link it to a previous statement. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: “The *also* (AV, RV) with which this proverb properly begins may indicate that it was once paired with another, such as 18:5, which it resembles and goes beyond. In 18:5 the man in the right loses his lawsuit; here, he is fined or flogged.” Proverbs 18:5 reads: “It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice.” The Hebrew word rendered “integrity” is *yosher*, which means: “righteous.”

We know that our actions ought to be prompted by integrity and righteousness and that this should be praised and rewarded. But we live in a world in which moral behavior is as rare as a pearl of great value. The Apostle Peter, remembering the suffering and death of his Master, Jesus Christ, pronounced a blessing upon the just who are punished and suffer for their integrity. We read: “But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”² This does not condone persecution but it uses abuse as a weapon used on the perpetrator. And Jesus devotes two beatitudes to those who are persecuted: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”³ This does not make wrong right, but it uses wrong to bring out righteousness and thus it defeats the enemy with his own weapon.

27 A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.

28 Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases these two verses: “The one who knows much says little; an understanding person remains calm. Even dunces who keep quiet are thought to be wise; as long as they keep their mouths shut, they are smart.”

The two most important Hebrew words in v.27 are *qar ruwach*, “a cool spirit.” The person keeps his cool, to use a contemporary expression. This places the conversation in the context of a tense situation in which it could be expected that tempers would flare up. Wisdom demonstrates itself in that condition by keeping the conversation to a minimum. The fool, ‘*eviy*’ in Hebrew, is a frequent guest in *The Book of*

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1. Eph. 6:1-4
 2. I Peter 3:14-17
 3. See Matt. 5:10-12.

Proverbs; we find him mentioned nineteen times. He appears in the theme verse of the book: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.”¹

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “The dry advice of 28 is not purely ironical: the fool who takes it is no longer a complete fool.” The ones who pass judgment in this case are the bystanders. We are judged on what we say and how we say it.

The Apostle James digs below the surface of this verse by pointing to the Word of God in us as the means of controlling factor in all our conversations. We read: “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”²

8. Chapter Eighteen

1 An unfriendly man pursues selfish ends; he defies all sound judgment.

2 A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

3 When wickedness comes, so does contempt, and with shame comes disgrace.

4 The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters, but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on v.1: “This is a difficult verse, and has obtained various interpretations. The Authorized Version gives, Through desire a man, having separated himself, seeketh and intermeddleth with all wisdom; *i.e.* a man who has an earnest desire for self-improvement will hold himself aloof from worldly entanglements, and, occupying himself wholly in this pursuit, will become conversant with all wisdom. This gives good sense, and offers a contrast to the fool in ver. 2, who ‘hath no delight in understanding.’ But the Hebrew does not rightly bear this interpretation. Its conciseness occasions ambiguity. Literally, *For his desire a man who separates himself seeks; in (or against) all wisdom he mingles himself.* There is a doubt whether the life of isolation is praised or censured in this verse. Aben Ezra and others of Pharisaic tendencies adopt the former alternative, and explain pretty much as the Authorized Version, thus: ‘He who out of love of wisdom divorces himself from home, country, or secular pursuits, such a man will mix with the wise and prudent, and be conversant with such.’ But the maxim seems rather to blame this separation, though here, again, there is a variety of interpretation.”

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, reads: “Loners who care only for themselves spit on the common good.” The Living Bible seems to catch the spirit of the verse well with: “The selfish man quarrels against every sound principle of conduct by demanding his own way.”

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary leans toward a more positive interpretation. We read: “He finds that he can make little progress in the investigation of divine and natural things, if he have much to do with secular or trifling matters: he therefore separates himself as well from unprofitable pursuits as from frivolous company, and then enters into the spirit of his pursuit; is not satisfied with superficial observances, but examines the substance and essence, as far as possible, of those things which have been the objects of his desire. This appears to me the best meaning: the reader may judge for himself.”

In our efforts to determine whether the verse recommends or condemns separation we will be influenced by how we see the context in which it appears. If we see some unity in the first four verses, we may see the separatist in v.1 as opposed to the fool in v.2, which speaks to his advantage, however unfriendly the NIV represents him. If we consider v.1 an unrelated verse, we may in fact look upon him as a maverick. On the other hand, the unfriendly man and the fool may be the same person.

V.2 contains another hard to interpret statement in the second line. The Hebrew reads literally: “A fool has no delight in understanding but that his heart may discover itself.” Here again *The Adam Clarke’s*

1. Prov. 1:7

2. James 1:19-21

Commentary tries to give a positive twist to a seemingly negative clause: “The separated person seeks understanding in every hidden thing, and feels his toil well repaid when he finds it, even after the most painful and expensive search: the other regards it not, though its secret springs should be laid open to him without toll or expense.”

The Pulpit Commentary states about the first part of the verse: “This may mean that he takes no pleasure in the wisdom of others, is self-opinionated; or, it may be, does not care for understanding in itself, apart from the use which he can make of it. Vulgate, ‘The fool receives not the words of wisdom;’ Septuagint, ‘A man of no sense has no need of wisdom.’ To try to teach a fool is to cast pearls before swine, and to give that which is holy unto dogs. **But that his heart may discover itself;** *i.e.* his only delight is in revealing his heart, displaying his un-wisdom and his foolish thoughts, as in ... Proverbs 12:28; 13:16; 15:2. He thinks that thus he is showing himself superior to others, and benefiting the world at large. The LXX. gives the reason, ‘For rather by folly he is led.’ ”

The verse seems to suggest that it is foolish to take one’s own greatness for granted. A healthy measure of self-examination, a comparison of the image of God within us with the original will soon bring us to the conclusion that we are far from where God intends us to be. For the interpretation of the Hebrew verb *galah*, rendered by the NIV as “airing his own opinions,” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, refers to its first use in the story of Noah’s drunkenness, where we read: “When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent.”¹ It was after Adam and Eve sinned that they discovered the nakedness of their soul and they were ashamed.

V.3 makes the connection between sin and shame. The Hebrew reads literally: “When the wicked comes then comes also contempt and with ignominy reproach.” Eugene H. Peterson’s *Proverbs* reads interestingly: “When wickedness arrives, shame’s not far behind; contempt for life is contemptible.” Derek Kidner, calling the verse “Sin’s traveling companions,” observes in *Proverbs*: “The three terms for shame give triple emphasis to this corollary of sin (the antithesis of the glory which is the corollary of holiness: Is. 6:3; Rom.8:30); and the Bible elsewhere shows it to be one of sin’s first (Gn. 3:7) and final (Dn. 12:2) fruits.” And *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The contempt here spoken of is not that with which the sinner is regarded, but that which he himself learns to feel for all that is pure and good and lovely (...Psalm 31:18).” The same commentary gives the Septuagint reading: “When the wicked cometh into the depth of evil, he despises” meaning “he turns a despiser.” Quoting Pope Gregory’s *Morals on the Book of Job*, *The Pulpit Commentary* reads: “As he who is plunged into a well is confined to the bottom of it; so would the mind fall in, and remain, as it were, at the bottom, if, after having once fallen, it were to confine itself within any measure of sin. But when it cannot be contented with the sin into which it has fallen, while it is daily plunging into worse offences, it finds, as it were, no bottom to the well into which it has fallen, on which to rest. For there would be a bottom to the well, if there were any bounds to his sin. Whence it is well said, ‘When a sinner hath come into the lowest depth of sins, he contemns.’ For he puts by returning, because he has no hope that he can be forgiven. But when he sins still more through despair, he withdraws, as it were, the bottom from the well, so as to find therein no resting place.”

The final verse in this cluster of four places us again for a choice between opposing interpretations. If we follow the line of thought with consistency we must conclude that the deep waters are stagnant and polluted, while the bubbling brook represents life, freshness and purity.

Yet, most commentators reflect favorably on this verse as if it gives a synonym rather than an antithesis. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, for instance, comments: “Three different things are said of the words from a man’s mouth: they are deep waters, for their meaning does not lie on the surface, but can be perceived only by penetrating into the secret motives and aims of him who speaks; they are a bubbling brook, which freshly and powerfully gushes forth to him who feels this flow of words, for in this brook there never fails an always new gush of living water; it is a fountain or well of wisdom, from which wisdom flows forth, and whence wisdom is to be drawn.” But *Barnes’ Notes* states: “The parallelism of the two clauses is

1. Gen. 9:21

probably one of contrast. If so, the proverb is a comparison between all teaching from without and that of the light within.” The complicating factor is the mention of the depth of the water. We believe that people who have depth in their thoughts and emotions are not superficial. On the other hand, what is the purpose of depth that cannot be measured? And we must admit that no human being completely knows himself or ever reaches the bottom of his own soul. Jesus’ analysis of the content of the human heart takes us by surprise.¹ And it is difficult for us to fully consent to Jeremiah’s statement that “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”² The fountain of wisdom does not spring up from without but from without. We ought to be thankful for that.

5 It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice.

6 A fool’s lips bring him strife, and his mouth invites a beating.

7 A fool’s mouth is his undoing, and his lips are a snare to his soul.

8 The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man’s inmost parts.

9 One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “It is not good to accept the person of the wicked and to overthrow the righteous in judgment.” The Hebrew word for judgment, *mishpat*, does not always refer to an official verdict. We find it, for instance in the verse in which God, speaking about Abraham, says: “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and *just*, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”³

We saw partiality condemned in the previous chapter and we will see it done so again in Chapters Twenty-Four and Twenty-Eight: “These also are sayings of the wise: To show partiality in judging is not good: Whoever says to the guilty, ‘You are innocent — peoples will curse him and nations denounce him. But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come upon them.’” And “To show partiality is not good — yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread.”⁴ But the question is whether v.5 fits in a court of law as the other verses do. The following verses seem to invite us to take a closer look at the person we want to favor: the fool.

The one we are invited to look at gets himself in trouble by talking too much and too loosely. The corporal punishment may not be so much the imposition of an official fine but the wish of those who hear him speak. If we insult someone we must not be amazed when that person strikes back, sometimes literally. V.6 describes what hits the fool’s body but v.7 looks at what loose talk does to someone’s soul. As v.6 gives the human reaction v.7 points to what God does to the fool. The best way to read vv.6-8 may be backwards, starting with the gossip in v.8 and going back to the public reaction in v.6. We find a word-for-word copy of v.8 in Chapter 26.⁵

The Hebrew word translated “choice morsel” is *laham*, which literally means “something that burns.” Some interpret it “something to swallow.” *The King James Version* renders it “wound.” The idea seems to be something that looks appetizing but is actually poison. David describes one of his enemies (probably Doeg) as being such a gossip: “His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords.”⁶ The problem with gossip is that it makes for such

1. See Matt. 15:18,19.

2. Jer. 17:9

3. Gen. 18:19

4. See Prov. 24:23-25; 28:21.

5. See Prov. 26:22.

interesting conversation! Those who gossip always find listening ears. But the poison also affect the speaker's own heart, as the previous verse indicates.

James warns: "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check."¹ And we do well to make David's prayer our own: "Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips."²

"The one who is slack in his work," in v.9, is obviously the *`atsel*, "the slothful" we met earlier; he is not recognized in this verse by his character but by his work. He is characterized by a verb, "to slacken," *raphah* in Hebrew. In the context of the verses before us, he is "the wicked" and "a fool." Here he is judged by what he produces, or rather by the lack of it. We will all, ultimately, be judged by what we leave behind in this world, not by what we think ourselves to be. Looking at the slothful, it may be helpful to keep in mind the words of the Apostle Paul: "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."³ Only that which is done for the love of God will remain. He who does not live and work for the glory of God is a fool, and slothful.

10 The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.

11 The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall.

12 Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor.

These three verses are about real protection and imagined safety. Fear is a prominent factor in the life of every person. As children we are afraid of the dark and that fear does not totally subside as we grow up, although darkness takes on another dimension. The Bible has much to say about darkness, particularly about the spiritual reality of it. Darkness is described as enemy territory in which Satan is the supreme ruler. The Apostle Paul describes our salvation as being "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son."⁴ The healthiest thing we can do is to be afraid of the darkness and run away from it. In the light of the New Testament "the Name of the LORD" acquires a new meaning. Paul pronounced the Name of Jesus to cast out a demon from a soothsaying girl.⁵ And the enemy, obviously, recognizes the power of Jesus' Name, for we read that when some unconverted Jewish exorcists tried to use the Name, the demon answered: "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?"⁶

The comparison of the Name of the LORD with a tower emphasizes the fact that we are at war and that we need a place that can hold out against enemy attack. A modern equivalent would read: "The name of the LORD is an impregnable bomb shelter." Bunkers of concrete are not the ultimate protection we need. Since the battle is a spiritual one, we need supreme spiritual protection. The Name of Jesus will protect us if we take up abode in it, because of Jesus' victory over Satan. In the Book of the Psalms it is written: "If you

6. Ps. 55:21

1. James 3:2

2. Ps. 141:3

3. I Cor. 3:10-15

4. See Col. 1:13.

5. Acts 16:18

6. Acts 19:15

make the Most High your dwelling — even the LORD, who is my refuge — then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.”¹

Righteousness is not a prerequisite for divine protection. If it were nobody could be safe in this world. The very fact that we flee to God constitutes a confession of sin. Our protection consists in our being covered with a righteousness that is not our own. Our flight will make us righteous. Protection is absolute; after all who can match omnipotence? *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments on our security in God: “It is a strong tower to those who know how to make use of it as such. The righteous, by faith and prayer, devotion towards God and dependence on him, run into it, as their city of refuge. Having made sure their interest in God’s name, they take the comfort and benefit of it; they go out of themselves, retire from the world, live above, dwell in God and God in them, and so they are safe, they think themselves so, and they shall find themselves so.”

V.11 shows us the substitute measures people take to protect themselves by building their own walls of defense. We believe that money provides safety, as if safety is something that can be bought and Satan can be bribed with money. We have seen earlier what most people consider to be the importance of money. Solomon wrote: “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor.”² It is interesting that these words came from the man who may have been the richest person ever in world history. He recognized the deceitful role money plays. Jesus warns us about the effect possessions or the lack of them can have upon the way we hear and accept the Word of God that can save us. In *The Parable of the Sower*, He compared “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth” to thorns that choke the Word of God in our hearts.³ The Bible does not condemn riches but it reprimands those who use it wrongly. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”⁴

The Hebrew in v.11 reads literally: “The rich man’s wealth is his strong city, and as a high wall in his own conceit.” The word “conceit” is the translation of the Hebrew *maskiyth*, which can either mean “a figure carved in stone,” “a wall,” or “something imagined.” The Living Bible paraphrases the verse: “The rich man thinks of his wealth as an impregnable defense, a high wall of safety. What a dreamer!”

V.12 traces the rich man’s imagined safety to pride, the most original of all sins, the one that caused the fall of Lucifer. The verse combines two previous statements in *The Book of Proverbs*: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall”⁵ and “The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor.”⁶ To build walls of protection against the grace of God by the acquisition of wealth will inevitably lead to ruin, maybe not to bankruptcy in this world but certainly in the world to come. The way to honor, which is considered to be the purpose of all acquirement of possessions, is through humility.

13 He who answers before listening — that is his folly and his shame.

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1. Ps.91:9-13
 2. Prov. 10:15
 3. See Matt. 13:22.
 4. I Tim. 6:17-19
 5. Prov. 16:18
 6. Prov. 15:33

There may be still some of the rich man's pride of the previous verses in this statement. But poor people can jump to conclusions as easily as the rich. This verse elaborates on a previous statement in the same chapter: "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions."¹ The Hebrew reads literally: "He who answers a matter before he hears it; it is folly unto him and shame." The word "shame," *kelimma* in Hebrew, occurs only here in *The Book of Proverbs*. A good translation of it is "disgrace," or "confusion." The first relationship in which it is disastrous not to listen well is the relationship with God. James puts this proverb in a broader context by relating it to the Word of God and its effect upon our life: "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."²

In inter-human relations being a good listener makes for good friendships. The apocryphal book *Ecclesiasticus* states: "Answer not before thou hast heard the cause, neither interrupt men in the midst of their talk."³ The person who gives the answer before hearing the question projects the image of a know-it-all. And everyone knows that no human being is omniscient. The shame factor comes in when it becomes obvious that one is not what one wants people to believe. In *The Parable of the Wedding Banquet*, Jesus portrays a man who had refused to wear the prescribed garment for the feast. We read: "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless."⁴ Such will be our ultimate shame when we do not learn the art of listening to God or to our fellowmen.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary comments: "Whereas, though a ready wit is an agreeable thing to play with, it is solid judgment and sound wisdom that do business. Those that take a pride in being quick commonly fall under the just reproach of being impertinent. It is folly for a man to go about to speak to a thing which he does not understand, or to pass sentence upon a matter which he is not truly and fully informed of, and has not patience to make a strict enquiry into; and, if it be folly, it is and will be shame."

14 A man's spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?

This verse is the twin to one in the previous chapter: "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."⁵ The point is not necessarily that all sickness is related to a spiritual problem, but it emphasizes the role our spirit plays in our physical condition. The first proverb uses heart and spirit as equivalents; in this verse only the spirit is mentioned. We consider man to be a tri-unity. The Apostle Paul distinguished the three parts of human life when he prayed: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁶ The spirit is the organ that allows us to have fellowship with God. When Adam sinned, his spirit died and fellowship with God was broken. That eventually caused his physical death. Our spirits are brought back to life through the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit upon us.

It is obvious that there would be no sickness in this world if sin had not entered creation. In the present condition in which we live in a polluted world, we need a healthy fellowship with God in order to maintain a measure of physical health. If the sanctification of which Paul speaks keeps us blameless, our

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1. Prov. 18:2
 2. James 1:19-21
 3. Ecclesiasticus 11:8
 4. Matt. 22:11,12
 5. Prov. 17:22
 6. I Thess. 5:23

spirit, soul, and body will experience its effect. The sins we commit and do not confess will have a crushing effect upon our spirit and consequently will have its bearing upon soul and body. David experienced inner healing when he confessed his sin to the Lord, presented himself as a sacrifice to God and said: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”¹

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary observes: “A man’s own spirit has, in general, sufficient fortitude to bear up under the unavoidable trials of life; but when the conscience is wounded by sin, and the soul is dying by iniquity, who can lift him up? God alone; for salvation is of the Lord.”

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, “In the first clause, ‘spirit,’ is masculine, in the second it is feminine, intimating by the change of gender that in the former case it is a manly property, virile moral quality, in the latter it has become weakened and depressed through affliction.”

15 The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out.

The discerning (*biyn*) and the wise (*chakam*) are given as parallels in this verse, but they are not identical. The discerning is the analytical mind, the one who distinguishes between good and evil. The wise is the one who has learned to fear God. The suggestion is that the one will lead to the other. A desire to really know the difference between good and evil will lead us to the Person of God and will establish a healthy awe for Him in our hearts. The verse also suggests that wisdom needs a basis in the human heart. The principle of the Kingdom of Heaven is that “Everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”²

The fact that the ears of the wise are mentioned indicates that listening is an important part in acquiring wisdom. This links this proverb to the one we saw above.

16 A gift opens the way for the giver and ushers him into the presence of the great.

17 The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.

18 Casting the lot settles disputes and keeps strong opponents apart.

19 An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel.

What links these verses together is the courtroom in which they take us. V.16 can be taken two ways; it can be interpreted as an effort to bribe a judge, but it can also mean a gift of appeasement. The Hebrew text reads literally: “A man’s gift makes room for him and brings him before great men.” The Hebrew word used here is *mattan*, which does not carry in itself the meaning of a kickback. We find it in the verse in which God said to Aaron: “This also is yours: whatever is set aside from *the gifts* of all the wave offerings of the Israelites. I give this to you and your sons and daughters as your regular share. Everyone in your household who is ceremonially clean may eat it.”³ It is not the same word as in the verse: “A *bribe* is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds.”⁴ The Hebrew word there is *shachad*. Most Bible scholars condemn the practice, but if we place it in the context of the culture in which it was written, it may appear less offensive than it would in our western society. If the judges in Israel were not paid by the king but had to live from what the plaintive and accused would give, it does not differ from the practice that gave to the priest part of the sacrificial animal.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The term here signifies the present which duty or friendship offers to one whom one wishes to please. This paves a man’s way to a great person’s presence. *Bringeth him*

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1. Ps. 51:17
 2. Matt. 25:29
 3. Num. 18:11
 4. Prov. 17:8

before great men. The Oriental custom of offering suitable gifts to one in authority, when a favor or an audience is desired, is here alluded to (comp. ... 1 Samuel 10:27; ... 1 Kings 4:21; 10:25). So the Magi brought gifts so the newborn King at Bethlehem (... Matthew 2:11). In a spiritual sense, the right use of riches opens the way to eternal life, evincing a man's practical love of God and man; as Christ says (... Luke 16:9), 'Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles' (Revised Version)."

V.17 sounds like a tongue-in-cheek statement made by a courtroom reporter about the proceedings of a case. The accusatory testimonial seemed airtight till the defense lawyer presented all the facts.

The Hebrew text reads literally: "He that is first seems just in his own cause; but comes his neighbor and searches him." The word translated "neighbor" is *rea*, which can simply mean "another." We find it in the verse about the tower of Babel: "They said to *each other*, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar."¹ Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, renders the verse: "The first speech in a court case is always convincing – until the cross-examination starts." Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states: "RSV is clearer than the older versions: *He who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.* It is the third warning in this chapter against forming hasty opinions (see 2 and 13)." And *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "We must therefore remember that we have two ears, to hear both sides before we give judgment." According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, the *Septuagint* reads: "The righteous is his own accuser in opening the suit."

V.18 can be linked to the earlier statement: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD."² The lot cast is probably a reference to the use of the Urim and the Thummim. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "If this verse is taken in connection with the preceding, it refers to the decision in doubtful cases, where the evidence is conflicting and ordinary investigation fails to elicit the truth satisfactorily. The lot, being considered to show the judgment of God, settled the question." Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, remarks about this verse: "The Christian equivalent of the implied advice of this proverb is to seek God's leading, when interests or opinions clash, and to accept it with good grace."

V.19 reads in the Hebrew text: "An offended brother is harder to be won than a strong city and their contentions are like the bars of a castle."

The Pulpit Commentary quotes Aristotle, who wrote: "If men receive no return from those to whom they have shown kindness, they deem themselves, not only defrauded of due gratitude, but actually injured. Whence it is said, 'Bitter are the quarrels of friends;' and, 'Those who love beyond measure also hate beyond measure.'" The *Commentary* adds: "An English maxim gloomily decides, 'Friendship once injured is forever lost.'" "

It may be good to place this verse against the background of Jesus' words: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."³ The introductory word "therefore" invites us to look at the context. Jesus spoke about lack of love and respect towards a brother, placing that on the same level as murder. Calling someone "raca" or "fool" would make us stand on trial for our life both before man and God.⁴ The Apostle John supplements this by stating: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."⁵

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1. Gen. 11:3
 2. Prov. 16:33
 3. Matt. 5:23,24
 4. See Matt. 5:21,22.
 5. I John 3:14-16

On the other hand, we ought not to become defensive, build up our walls and bar our gates, when people insult us. Jesus also said: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”¹ Immediately following that statement, our Lord said: “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”² Becoming defensive makes us like salt that loses its saltiness. This means that we are no longer what God wants us to be in this world.

20 From the fruit of his mouth a man’s stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied.
21 The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

The imagery of v.20 is difficult to explain. The Living Bible paraphrases the verse: “Ability to give wise advice satisfies like a good meal!” That seems to be a little too far from the mark. *The New Living Translation* reads: “Words satisfy the soul as food satisfies the stomach; the right words on a person’s lips bring satisfaction.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, gives the reading: “Words satisfy the mind as much as fruit does the stomach; good talk is as gratifying as a good harvest.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on both verses: “The second of this pair of proverbs, with its warning to the talkative, throws a sobering light on the first. Both of them urge caution, for satisfied (20) can mean ‘sated’: the meaning, good or bad, will depend on the care taken. Moffatt paraphrases 20 well, but one-sidedly: ‘A man must answer for his utterances, and take the consequences of his words.’ Oesterley quotes the witty saying of Ahikar: ‘My son, sweeten thy tongue, and make savory the opening of thy mouth; for the tail of a dog gives him bread, and his mouth gets him blows.’ ”

It is true that the gift of speech is a mixed blessing. Not all fruit is created equal either! As in Paradise, there is a tree of life and a tree of death. We have to be as careful about what enters our mouth as about what comes out of it.

22 He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD.

The verse is obviously written by a man in a man’s world. The statement seems rather broad in that it does not specify “a good wife” as Chapter Thirty-one does.³ But then the verse does not indicate either what kind of person the husband is. At the time of man’s creation, God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone.”⁴ And we read: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”⁵ There are no longer any perfect marriages on earth since our first parents fell into sin. But that does not mean that the image of God is not meant to be revealed in the marriage of a man and a woman. God’s favor is demonstrated in the physical union and the melting together of two souls in the bonds of marriage. There is a sense in which all marriages are made in heaven. We may do a poor job in acting out the roles God has written for us, husbands and wives, but that does not mean that the play is not good. As a poor Hamlet is no reflection on the genius of Shakespeare so are broken marriages no stain on God’s plan of creation. It is important to see that the consummation of God’s plan of salvation is presented to us as a wedding banquet, a celebration of the marriage of the Lamb of God with the bride, His church. As the Apostle Paul says: “ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and

1. Matt. 5:11,12
2. Matt. 5:13
3. See Prov. 31:10-31.
4. Gen. 2:18
5. Gen. 1:27

the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.”¹

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, remarks: “The wording, especially in the Heb., strikingly resembles that of 8:35, and so suggests that after wisdom itself, the best of God’s blessings is a good wife. 31:10 makes a similar comparison, putting her price, like wisdom’s (8:11), above rubies. It is implicit here, and explicit in, e.g., 19:13,14, that not any and every wife is in mind: see, by contrast, 14:1; 21:9!”

The verses quoted here read respectively: “For whoever finds me [wisdom] finds life and receives favor from the LORD.”² “A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.”³ “A foolish son is his father’s ruin, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping. Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.”⁴ “The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.”⁵ “Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.”⁶

23 A poor man pleads for mercy, but a rich man answers harshly.

24 A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

The Hebrew text of v.23 uses the word *tachanuwn*, “supplication” for “mercy.” This is the only place where that word is found in *The Book of Proverbs*. Solomon uses it in his prayer of dedication of the temple: “Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive.”⁷ The verse does not speak about prayer in fellowship with God but about the role money plays in inter-human relationships. Derek Kidner, in his commentary *Proverbs*, observes: “Such detached reporting, with its pointed lack of comment, faces the reader with the ugliness of the world he lives in.”

Kidner is correct in his observation that this verse merely states the fact without commenting on the moral value of the statement. The emphasis seems to be particularly on the attitude of the rich man, who believes that his possessions express his inner worth. Jesus says: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”⁸ Yet, we tend to express human worth in terms of money. We say that such and such is worth so many million dollars, not realizing that if the price of a human soul can be expressed in dollar figures it is not worth much. How do we answer Jesus’ question: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”⁹ If God considers us to be worth more than all the riches of the world, why do we use such poor standards of evaluation? As it turned out in Jesus’ story about the rich man and Lazarus, in eternity it was poor Lazarus who was rich and the rich man who was poorer than Lazarus had ever been in this world.¹⁰

The Hebrew of v.24 is rather difficult to translate. The text in *The Interlinear Bible* reads: “A man who has friends must show himself friendly and there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother.” The word rendered “show himself friendly” is *ra`a`*, which actually means, “to spoil,” “to break to pieces,” “to be

1. Eph. 5:31,32
2. Prov. 8:35
3. Prov. 31:10
4. Prov. 19:13,14
5. Prov. 14:1
6. Prov. 21:9
7. II Chron. 6: 21
8. Luke 12:15
9. Matt. 16:26
10. See Luke 16:19-31.

good for nothing,” or “to be socially or morally bad.” We find it in Lot’s words to the men of Sodom who wanted to rape the angels: “Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, ‘No, my friends. Don’t *do this wicked thing.*’”¹

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The Authorized Version is certainly not correct. The Hebrew is literally, *a man of friends will come to destruction* ... the maxim means that the man of many friends, who lays himself out to make friends of bad and good alike, does so to his own ruin. They will feed upon him, and exhaust his resources, but will not stand by him in the day of calamity, nay, rather will give a helping hand to his downfall. It is not the number of so called friends that is really useful and precious.”

Barnes’ Notes observes: “Better, ‘A man of many companions is so to his own destruction, but there is a friend (the true, loving friend) etc.’ It is not the multitude of so called friends that helps us. They may only embarrass and perplex. What we prize is the one whose love is stronger and purer even than all ties of kindred.”

And Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, writes: “The first line reads lit. ‘A man of friends [is] to be shattered.’ The verb is a play on the Heb. for ‘to make friends’ (found in 22:24); but it is not the same word, as AV (*must show himself friendly*) and RSV would prefer. (RSV reads: *There friends who pretend to be friends.*) The RV gives the most probable sense of the Heb. text: *He that maketh many friend (doeth it) to his own destruction.*” But the Heb. is very cryptic, and there is a case for reading the opening word (cf. RSV) not as ‘a-man-of,’ but as ‘there-are’ (a very small consonantal difference).” Seen in connection with the previous verse, we may draw the conclusion that the friendships of the rich man are fed by his riches. When the source of wealth dries up, so will the friends. Real friendship will survive times of crisis. Blood is thicker than water, but there is something that is thicker yet in the bond that ties people together in the love of Jesus Christ.

9. Chapter Nineteen

1 Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a fool whose lips are perverse.

2 It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.

3 A man’s own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD.

4 Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man’s friend deserts him.

These four verses form a square, the sides of which define the boundaries of a life well lived. In v.1 integrity is emphasized. V.2 looks at the relative value of speed. V.3 speaks of responsibility taken and v.4 about genuine love in human relations.

V.1 is almost identical to a proverb in a later chapter: “Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse.”²

The Hebrew of v.1 reads: “Better is the poor that walks in his integrity than he that is perverse in his lips and is a fool.” “The fool” here is not the same as the atheist in *The Book of Psalms*, the one of whom we read: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.”³ That person is *nabal*, one who is stupid because he is wicked. The fool in this verse is *keciyl*, that is someone who is “fat,” or “silly.” In this verse the skinny man of honesty is placed next to the fat fellow who is perverse. In our modern weight-conscious society the image does not carry the weight (forgive the pun) that it would in cultures where being fat is the equivalent of being blessed. What is contrasted here is the inner worth with the outward appearance. The one who seems to have everything going for him is the fool because blamelessness or integrity, *tom* in Hebrew, is what ultimately determines a person’s eternal destiny.

1. Gen. 19:7

2. Prov. 28:7

3. Ps. 14:1

The Pulpit Commentary observes here: “The writer would seem to insinuate that there is a natural connection between poverty and integrity of life on the one hand, and wealth and folly on the other. He would assent to the sweeping assertion, ... ‘Every rich man is either a rascal or a rascal’s heir.’ ” We must insist though, that the Bible does not condemn riches in itself. It is not how much or what we possess but where we got it and what we do with it that counts.

The parallel clause suggests that integrity is related to our speech. The poor man’s integrity is compared to the lips of the fool. It is obvious, though, that the lips are only the tools of foolishness; they produce what the heart dictates. Jesus says: “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”¹

V.2 reads in Hebrew: “It is also not good that the soul be without knowledge, and he that hastens with his feet sins.” Enthusiasm is only laudable in good causes. It is usually found in younger people who lack the ability to discern the worth of the cause they give themselves to. It used to be said in Europe that if a person is under thirty and not a socialist, he has no heart. If he is still a socialist over thirty, he has no head! That adage does not say much about socialism but it well describes the mind-set of youth. Enthusiasm can be a virtue or a vice depending on the cause on which it is spent. The advantage of youthful eagerness is that most people who follow Christ are converted in their younger years. As we progress in life it becomes harder to turn back and confess our sins. The Apostle Paul put this proverb in the context of Israel’s rejection of their Messiah. In Romans, he writes: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”²

Another interesting feature in this verse is that the Hebrew word *chata*’, “to sin” is used for missing the way. The same word is found in the verse “Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred chosen men who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not *miss*.”³

V.3 shows us who to blame when things go wrong in life. We tend to take credit for our decision when all goes well, but we rarely blame ourselves for our catastrophes. The word to characterize human behavior is “inconsistency.” We believe that since God is omnipotent and loving He ought to keep us out of trouble. Yet we do not easily yield to His control over our lives. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes the poet Pope, who wrote:

*“Perverse mankind! whose wills, created free,
Charge all their woes on absolute decree;
All to the dooming gods their guilt translate,
And follies are miscalled the crimes of fate.”*

V.4 researches the foundations of friendship. Like love, friendship that seeks to exploit the object for its own profit does not deserve the name. The fact that riches isolate us from genuine friendships makes us lonely and miserable people. There are few happy millionaires in this world. The love of money will harvest just that: love of money and nothing else. The Apostle Paul warns us: “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”⁴

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1. Matt. 12:34,35
 2. Rom. 10:1-4
 3. Judg. 20:16
 4. I Tim. 6:9,10

5 A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will not go free.

6 Many curry favor with a ruler, and everyone is the friend of a man who gives gifts.

7 A poor man is shunned by all his relatives — how much more do his friends avoid him! Though he pursues them with pleading, they are nowhere to be found.

V.5 is the twin of v.9, which deviates only in the last few words. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “ ‘False witness’ is in public; ‘lies’ are also in private. They stand on the same footing, and shall have one doom.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, calls it “perjury.” We read: “This statement is made in faith, for perjurers may escape human justice. Even the stern law of Deuteronomy 19:18-21 availed nothing for Naboth—or for Jesus.” The verses in Deuteronomy read: “The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”¹

V.6 hints why some people may use lies in order to curry favor of important people. The Hebrew word translated “ruler” is *nadiyb*, which actually means “generous.” It is often rendered “prince.” The same word occurs in connection with a freewill offering as in the verse: “Everyone *who is willing* is to bring to the LORD an offering of gold, silver and bronze . . .”² Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases the verse: “Lots of people flock around a generous person; everyone’s a friend to the philanthropist.” We saw the same thought expressed in v.4. Genuine love, however, does not depend on how much it pays. We must not love God merely because He blesses. *The Book of Job* is built around Satan’s question: “Does Job fear God for nothing?”³ The Hebrew uses the idiomatic expression “entreat the face” for “curry one’s favor.” The Hebrew word *paniyim* means, “face.” *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests the reading: “Many will stroke the face of a prince.”

The thought of v.6 is continued in v.7 where the circle is drawn closer. The principle is not only observed in public or in high society, we find it even in the intimacy of the family and in friendships. The tenet does not only pertain to financial difficulties. Any problem that puts a person in a disadvantage (sickness, or loss) tends to create a distance between people. Suffering ostracizes. We find it hard to deal with grieving people.

The last part of this Proverb has caused problems of interpretation. The NIV states in a footnote: “The meaning of the Hebrew for this sentence is uncertain.” *Barnes’ Notes* suggests: “It seems best to follow the Vulgate in taking the last clause as a separate maxim, He who pursues words, naught are they; i.e., the fair speeches and promises of help come to nothing. A various reading in the Hebrew gives, ‘he pursues after words, and these he shall have’ - i.e., these, and nothing else.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, gives the interesting paraphrase: “When you’re down on your luck, even your family avoids you—yes, even your best friends wish you’d get lost. If they see you coming, they look the other way—out of sight, out of mind.”

8 He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who cherishes understanding prospers.

We read in an earlier chapter: “For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the LORD. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death.”⁴ The Hebrew word for “wisdom”

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1. Deut. 19:18-21
 2. Ex. 35:5
 3. Job 1:9

in this verse is not the word that is used throughout the book. *Leb* literally means: “the center of anything” and in almost every instance in which it occurs in Proverbs it is translated “heart.” The common word for “wisdom” is *chokmah*, which is what we find in the fear of the Lord as in the verse: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding.”¹ The word “soul” is *nephesh* in Hebrew, which refers to any breathing creature, particularly to man. As in the verse: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”² What does this different shade of meaning mean for us? I believe the emphasis is on the image of God that occupies the center place in our life. This is particularly meaningful in view of the New Testament theology about the restoration of the broken image in us. God promised such renewal in the Old Testament by mouth of Ezekiel. We read: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”³ And the Apostle Paul speaks about having “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”⁴

9 A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will perish.

We observed that this verse is the twin of v.5 in this chapter, the only difference being that in v.5 there was merely a warning of punishment. Here it is stated that the perjurer will perish. The Hebrew word *abad* has the meaning of losing one’s way. There is a gentle suggestion that conversion, turning around and finding the right way is not excluded yet. We find the word in the verse: “Pharaoh’s officials said to him, ‘How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the LORD their God. Do you not yet realize that Egypt *is ruined*?’ ”⁵ At that point Egypt could still have been saved.

10 It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury — how much worse for a slave to rule over princes!

The Hebrew word, rendered “luxury” is *ta`anuwg*, which *The King James Version* renders “delight.” Most modern translations use “luxury,” which is its implied meaning. The word is not used often in the Old Testament. Solomon uses it in all three books attributed to him and we also find it in Micah. In Solomon’s Song of Songs we read that the boy says to the girl: “How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your *delights*!”⁶

The first part of this proverb is easier to understand for us than the second parallel part. It sounds as if the author endorses a society of segregated classes in which untouchables ought not to mingle with high-class people. The suggestion in the parallel seems to be that only fools are slaves. We must remember that slavery in Israel originally consisted in people hiring themselves out to their countrymen for the purpose of paying off their debts. Against that background it is reasonable to state that people who are in debt ought to maintain a frugal lifestyle. One of the important lessons in this book is that one should not get in debt. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “Such a life is ruin to a fool, who knows not how to use it properly; it

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4. Prov. 8:35,36
 1. Ps. 111:10
 2. Gen. 2:7 (KJV)
 3. Ezek. 36:25-27
 4. Col. 3:10
 5. Ex. 10:7
 6. Song 7:6

confirms him in his foolish, sinful ways. A man needs religion and reason to enable him to bear prosperity advantageously, and these the fool lacks.”

11 A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

12 A king’s rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “The discretion of a man defers his anger and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.” A previous proverb stated the opposite truth: “A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated.”¹ The Hebrew word, rendered “offense” is *pesha`* means “rebellion,” or “transgression.” David uses it in one of his psalms: “Blessed is he whose *transgressions* are forgiven, whose sins are covered.”² The word denotes our condition of rebellion against God by which we risk eternal loss. The Person whose wisdom makes Him patient in relation to our transgressions is first of all God Himself. As the Apostle Peter writes: “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”³ The Apostle Paul expresses God’s patience by stating: “God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”⁴ It is because God has forgiven us that we can be patient with the offenses others commit against us. The Apostle Paul says again: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”⁵ As God demonstrated His glory in what He did for us in Jesus Christ, so we share in His glory as we forgive our fellowmen. The word “overlook” may give the impression that transgression does not matter. The Hebrew word *abar* also has the meaning of “to cover” which is what God did with sin in the Old Testament. We find the word used in the verse: “When the LORD *goes through* the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.”⁶ God passed through Egypt, and see what happened.

The following verse contrasts wrath with grace. We met part of this image earlier in the proverb: “When a king’s face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.”⁷ This picture of a monarch in Old Testament times reflects the image of the King of kings. As God’s going through Egypt had the opposite effect upon the Egyptians as it did on Israel, so it will have a different effect upon people who forgive because they have been forgiven than upon those who hold grudges. Jesus illustrates this clearly in His parable of the servant who was forgiven but did not want to forgive.⁸ The parable ends with the words: “In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”⁹

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1. Prov. 14:17
 2. Ps. 32:1
 3. II Peter 3:9
 4. Rom. 3:25,26
 5. Col. 3:13
 6. Ex. 12:23
 7. Prov. 16:15
 8. See Matt. 18:23-35.
 9. Matt. 18:34,35

**13 A foolish son is his father's ruin, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping.
14 Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.
15 Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry.**

These verses focus on the family, mostly on the unhappy one. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases them vividly with: "A parent is worn to a frazzle by a stupid child; a nagging spouse is a leaky faucet. House and land are handed down from parents, but a congenial spouse comes straight from GOD. Life collapses on loafers; lazybones go hungry." Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, quotes an Arab proverb containing alliterating words, which runs: "Three things make a house intolerable: *tak* (the leaking through of rain), *nak* (a wife's nagging) and *bak* (bugs)." The theme of the nagging wife recurs later on in *The Book of Proverbs*: "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand."¹ The "leaky faucet" was of course unknown in Old Testament Jewish homes. We must, therefore, think of a leaking roof.

Instead of dwelling on the graphic details, especially as far as the wife is concerned, we will find more edification if we look at this painting of an unhappy family. Leo Tolstoy, in *Anna Karenina*, opens his book with the sentence: "All happy families are like one another; but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The author creates the impression that a happy family is a dull one, as if excitement can only be found in broken homes. It might be better to state that happy families are rare and perfectly happy families are non-existent. There are no perfect human relationships on earth. The nagging wife may be a source of irritation; the alcoholic husband often means total ruin. Families in which all the children turn out well are exceptional. Only the place where the Lord is head of the home is a nest in which children grow up in an environment of love and care.

The "prudent wife" in v.14 is a person who possesses *sakal*, intelligence that makes her succeed. *The Book of Proverbs* tends to overemphasize the skillfulness of a housewife to the detriment of her motherly qualities of warmth and affection. We will take a closer look at this when we come to the end of the book. This verse, like all the others in Proverbs, is written from the male perspective. It does express the truth that good marriages are made in heaven and that God is the best matchmaker one can consult in the choice of a mate. The fact that blessing is expressed in terms of material benefits does not mean that this was all there was in Jewish culture. *The Song of Songs* highlights the other side of marital bliss. Both facets are images of emotional and spiritual satisfaction that are beyond description.

V.15 lets the revealing light shine on the male in the family, the breadwinner. The two important Hebrew words in this verse are *'atslah*, "slothfulness," and *remiyah*, which literally means "treachery" or "deceit." More is involved here than a desire for sleep, it is failure to meet one's obligation as provider of others; it is a breaking of the wedding vows. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "Slothfulness enervates a man, renders him as useless for labor as if he were actually asleep in his bed; it also enfeebles the mind, corrupts the higher faculties, converts a rational being into a witless animal. ... 'Idleness is a living man's tomb.'" The family in which the husband and father fails to provide security, both financially and otherwise, is an unhappy family. With all due respect to Leo Tolstoy, all unhappy families are alike in this regard.

**16 He who obeys instructions guards his life, but he who is contemptuous of his ways will die.
17 He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.
18 Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.
19 A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again.
20 Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.**

1. Prov. 27:15,16

“Instruction” in vv.16 and 20 is the translation of two different Hebrew words. The first is *mitzvah*, which is used for *The Ten Commandments*, as in the verse: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my *commandments*.”¹ The second word is *muwcar*, which literally means “chastisement.” The person who disregards God’s commandments does so to his own peril. Paul’s statements about Christians no longer being under the law does not mean that we have license to live immoral lives. We are responsible for “our ways” or for the way we live. Some Bible scholars interpret “will die” in the sense of being put to death. To live as if we will not have to give account for our acts will expose us to the wrath of God’s ultimate justice.

This does not merely pertain to outwardly obeying the rules; we put ourselves into mortal danger if we do not take our sanctification seriously. As the Apostle Paul wrote: “Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation — but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”² As God’s children we may depend upon the Holy Spirit for our sanctification.

V.17 shows how practical holiness is. In The New Testament the giving of alms is called “acts of righteousness.”³ The expression “lends to the Lord” is interesting. If our possessions belong to God to start with, how then can we lend anything to Him? As is clear from Jesus’ *Parable of the Sheep and the Goats*, the Lord comes to us in the disguise of a poor person for the purpose of seeing how we react.⁴ The dividend God returns to us will be far greater than the investment we make. As in Ezekiel’s vision, water that trickles from the sanctuary will grow into a river that cannot be crossed.⁵

In v.18 the father puts into practice what he has learned himself in v.16. A father who wants his son to be what he never became himself lacks the authority to administer discipline. The best motivation for a child to follow the Lord is to see godliness modeled in his parents. If we have experienced salvation we want our children to have it also. The Hebrew text reads: “Chasten your son while there is hope, and for his crying let your soul not spare.” This is open to various translations. The Hebrew word for “chasten” is *yacar*, which can mean “corporal punishment” or simply “instruction,” as in the verse: “The sayings of King Lemuel — an oracle his mother *taught* him.”⁶ The second part of the proverb has been rendered variously: “and let not thy soul spare for his crying” (*King James Version*), “And do not set your heart on his destruction” (*New King James Version*), with a footnote, stating: “Literally to put him to death; a Jewish tradition reads *on his crying*.” The Living Bible reads: “Discipline your son in his early years while there is hope. If you don’t you will ruin his life.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this: “Discipline your children while you still have the chance; indulging them destroys them.” *Barnes’ Notes* observes “a false clemency is a real cruelty... The father is warned that to forbear from chastising is virtually to expose the son who needs it to a far worse penalty.” That parents have authority and an obligation to teach their children the right way is obvious from what God said about Abraham: “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”⁷ We can either read in this verse that the father must

1. Ex. 20:5,6

2. Rom. 8:12-14

3. See Matt. 6:1-4.

4. See Matt. 25:35,40.

5. See Ezek. 47:1-12.

6. Prov 31:1

practice moderation in applying discipline or that he must discipline in order for his child to practice moderation in life. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes a German aphorism that states: “It is better that the child weep than the father.” Whatever is the right reading, both versions are actually needed.

V.19 can either be read as pertaining to the father in the previous verse or to the son. “Hot-tempered” is the translation of the Hebrew word *chemah*, which refers to heat that may be caused by fever. In this context it refers to an emotional condition. If both the father and the son are choleric conflict in a family seems unavoidable. Heredity often plays a role in such conditions. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, gives this proverb the heading: “His own worst enemy.” He states: “The Heb. text is cryptic and perhaps damages...but RV, RSV, agree with AV’s interpretation: *i.e.* an ungovernable temper will repeatedly land its owner in fresh trouble.” *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes a saying: “Anger is like a ruin, which breaks itself upon what it falls.” The best lesson to be drawn is the recognition that destructive anger can only be dealt with if it is owned up to and confessed so that the Holy Spirit can do His healing work in the heart.

V.20 suggests that the previous verse refers to the son rather than to the father. In that case v.19 addresses the father and v.20 the son. It is also good to remember that all fathers are someone’s son.

21 Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.

22 What a man desires is unfailing love; better to be poor than a liar.

23 The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.

V.21 continues the theme of previous proverbs we saw: “To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue” and “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.”¹ The maxim does not condemn human planning but it suggests that all our creative thinking must be made subservient to God’s ultimate purpose. An earlier proverb showed us what our basic attitude must be: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”² It is the acknowledgement of God’s priorities that will make us the channels through which God’s purpose in this world will prevail. If we do not first seek God’s Kingdom and its righteousness, our planning will oppose the purpose for which God placed us in this world. God will not only overrule our schemes but we will suffer the consequences.

The Hebrew text of v.22 reads: “The desire of a man is his kindness: and a poor man is better than a liar.” It is difficult to determine the meaning of the text since the Hebrew word *checed*, rendered “kindness” may refer to man or to God. *The King James Version* often translates *chesed*: “lovingkindness,” in which case it refers to God. As such we find it in the Psalm verse: “Because your *love* is better than life, my lips will glorify you.”³ But *chesed* can also mean “a desirable thing.” In that sense it is used in Jacob’s blessing for Joseph: “Your father’s blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the *bounty* of the age-old hills.”⁴ *The New International Version* adds an alternative reading in a footnote: “A man’s greed is his shame.” We would like to read in this verse man’s longing for God’s lovingkindness, but then the second clause which refers to poverty and honesty does not seem to make much sense. The best reading may be the one of the Revised Standard Version: “What is desired in a man is loyalty, and a poor man is better than a liar.”

The following verse, however, seems to pull this back into the relationship with God. It is also true that one cannot be genuinely honest or generous without “the fear of the Lord,” without standing in awe of

7. Gen. 18:18,19

1. See Prov. 16:1,9.

2. Prov. 3:5,6

3. Ps. 63:3

4. Gen. 49:26

God's greatness. It is only on the basis of eternal life in Christ that we are able to be what God wants us to be. *The Pulpit Commentary*, looking at the verse in the context of human relations, comments: "A poor man who gives to one in distress his sympathy and good wishes, even if he can afford no substantial aid, is better than a rich man who promises much and does nothing, or who falsely professes that he is unable to help ... Septuagint, 'A poor righteous man is better than a rich liar.' A Buddhist maxim says, 'Like a beautiful flower, full of colors, but without scent, are the fine but fruitless words of him who does not act accordingly.'"

24 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth!

25 Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence; rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge.

26 He who robs his father and drives out his mother is a son who brings shame and disgrace.

27 Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on v.24: "The scene is thus a meal, and the example comically extreme." Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, modernizes the scene by rendering it: "Some people dig a fork into a pie but are too lazy to raise it to their mouth." Evidently, the Old Testament saints used their fingers instead of silverware. Our sophistication may have changed but there has been no evolution of laziness. The point made is, obviously, that some people do not take the trouble to even take the most elementary step to get out of their sinful misery. Salvation is the easiest thing in our reach. The Apostle Paul writes: "The righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' ' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or 'Who will descend into the deep?' ' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." And "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."¹

The mocker in v.25 may not be the same person as the sluggard in the previous verse. Those who are too lazy to feed themselves may not have the energy that is required for mockery. We are introduced to three kinds of people in this verse: a mocker, a simple-minded person and a discerning man. The Hebrew words are respectively *luwts*, *pethiy* and *biyn*. We have met them all before in *The Book of Proverbs*. The mocker is one who makes a fool of himself. It is someone who, for instance, does not know a foreign language but who, instead of accepting the fact, tries to pronounce the words in a way that pokes fun at the foreigner. We described the simple earlier as someone "without moral direction and inclined to evil." And the discerning person is the one who possesses enough spiritual maturity to distinguish between good and evil.

More than about the value of corporal punishment, the verse seems to state the importance of punishment as a deterrent. The Apostle Paul advised Timothy: "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning."² Even if the mocker himself does not learn anything, others may.

V.26 seems to make the ultimate understatement. A son who steals from his parents and who makes life so miserable for his mother that she decides to leave her own home is a hardened criminal, not merely one who brings shame on the family name. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: "The second line is not the anticlimax which at first glance it may appear to be, for the ruin (*wasteth*, AV) and eviction are overshadowed by the special bitterness of receiving them from a son." Besides the clear commandment "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you,"³ there exists the bond of natural affections which ought to give a child the understanding that to harm

1. Rom. 10:6-9,13

2. I Tim. 5:20

one's parents means going against the most elementary laws of nature. He who dishonors his parents dishonors himself, because it is through them that he came into this world.

In a way this proverb reflects what humanity does to God. This verse became the theme of *The Book of Isaiah*, which opens with the statement: "Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: 'I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.'"¹

The obvious irony in v.27 is expressed in the bitterness of a parent who gave himself to his son's development and sees his child wasting his life. God Himself expressed this kind of exasperation when He told Isaiah to tell the people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."²

28 A corrupt witness mocks at justice, and the mouth of the wicked gulps down evil.

29 Penalties are prepared for mockers, and beatings for the backs of fools.

We find more mockery in the last two verses of this chapter, in which the level is raised to a higher level of justice. From the family home we are brought into the courtroom, where justice is supposed to be administered and respected. The Hebrew text calls "a corrupt witness," *ed beliya'al*, "a Belial witness." Justice is a divine attribute. There is a good reason why God calls judges *elohim*; they are supposed to demonstrate the character of God in the administration of human affairs. That is the reason Satan is constantly present in courtrooms. He always tries to use justice, which he abhors, for his own benefit and he manipulates it cleverly. He gives a bad name to lawyers and judges alike. Ungodly governments have always tried to maintain an air of respectability through kangaroo courts and other travesties of righteousness. Hitler and Stalin were masters of this art.

The false witness, even when recognized as false, usually finds a captive audience. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: "The second line delves beneath the cynicism to the craving for what is tainted." Our fallen nature does not only make us receptive to lies, it causes us to enjoy them. When Jesus Christ came to testify to the truth, the people refused to believe Him. Jesus said to them: "Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."³

V.29 warns of the consequences of indulging in the sins mentioned in the previous verse. Every punishment on earth is a warning of punishment to come. If punishment is administered from a mentality of love and concern it purports to redeem us. Evil authorities use punishment as a means of torture. About that Jesus said: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."⁴ The Apostle Paul warns us: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor

3. Ex. 20:12

1. Isa. 1:2,3

2. Isa. 6:9,10

3. John 8:43-47

4. Matt. 10:28

slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” And he adds: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”¹

10. Chapter Twenty

1 Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.

The text uses the Hebrew words *yayin* and *shekar* or *shekhar* to denote the kinds of drink that intoxicate. *Yayin* is wine, which was usually mixed with water for regular use. The kind mentioned here is probably full strength. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* explains about the word *shekhar*: “Originally shekhar seems to have been a general term for intoxicating drinks of all kinds, without reference to the material out of which they were made; and in that sense, it would include wine. Reminiscences of this older usage may be found in Num 28:7 (where shekhar is clearly equivalent to wine, as may be seen by comparing it with verse 14, and with Ex 29:40, where the material of the drink offering is expressly designated ‘wine’). Probably the most common sort of shekhar used in Biblical times was palm or date-wine. This is not actually mentioned in the Bible, and we do not meet with its Hebrew name *yen temarim* (‘wine of dates’) until the Talmudic period. But it is frequently referred to in the Assyrian-Babylonian contract tablets (cuneiform), and from this and other evidence we infer that it was very well known among the ancient Semitic peoples. Moreover, it is known that the palm tree flourished abundantly in Biblical lands, and the presumption is therefore very strong that wine made of the juice of dates was a common beverage. It must not be supposed, however, that the term shekhar refers exclusively to date-wine. It rather designates all intoxicating liquors other than grape-wine, while in few cases it probably includes even wine.” I do not understand why the *New International Version* renders *shekar* with “beer,” which is obviously the less intoxicating of alcoholic drinks. Eugene H. Peterson does the same in *Proverbs* by reading: “Wine makes you mean, beer makes you quarrelsome—a staggering drunk is not much fun.” Modern Biblical research probably accounts for this. But even *The New Living Translation* renders the verse: “Wine produces mockers; liquor leads to brawls. Whoever is led astray by drink cannot be wise.”

The main point, however, is the result of drunkenness. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments on the verse: “It deceives by its fragrance, intoxicates by its strength, and renders the intoxicated ridiculous.” Ever since Noah planted the first vineyard, alcohol has ravaged human lives, broken up marriages and caused countless crimes. It has only been surpassed in recent decades by drugs. Only divine wisdom can safeguard us from these onslaughts on human dignity.

Yet, we cannot say that it was Satan who invented alcohol. The Psalmist credits God for the gift of wine. “He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate — bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.”² But the Bible also teaches that our joy must not depend upon its use. David testified: “You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.”³

The Bible does not teach abstinence, but abstinence may be the safest way of conduct in a world ravaged by misuse of good things. C. S. Lewis states in one of his writings: “Temperance is, unfortunately, one of those words that has changed its meaning. It now usually means teetotalism. But in the days when the second Cardinal virtue was christened ‘Temperance’, it meant nothing of the sort. Temperance referred not specially to drink, but to all pleasures; and it meant not abstaining, but going the right length and no further. It is a mistake to think that Christians ought all to be teetotalers; Mohammedanism, not Christianity, is the

1. I Cor. 6:9-11
2. Ps. 104:14,15
3. Ps. 4:7

teetotal religion. Of course it may be the duty of a particular Christian, or of any Christian, at a particular time, to abstain from strong drink, either because he is the sort of man who cannot drink at all without drinking too much, or because he wants to give the money to the poor, or because he is with people who are inclined to drunkenness and must not encourage them by drinking himself. But the whole point is that he is abstaining, for a good reason, from something which he does not condemn and which he likes to see other people enjoying. One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting everyone else to give it up. That is not the Christian way. An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reason—marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning.”¹

2 A king’s wrath is like the roar of a lion; he who angers him forfeits his life.

3 It is to a man’s honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.

We encountered the first clause in v.2 in a previous chapter: “A king’s rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass.”² In this verse the consequences of enraging the king are spelled out. The Hebrew text reads literally: “As the roar of a lion is the fear of a king: whoso provokes him to anger sins against his own soul.” As we commented earlier on the same subject: This picture of a monarch in Old Testament times reflects the image of the King of kings. The prophet Amos opens his book with the same image to describe the effect of God’s wrath upon the sins of mankind: “The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers.”³

Only fools would argue with a wild lion; to provoke the Lion of Judah would be the greatest foolishness. Yet, people do so very easily without understanding that the lion always wins.

This truth covers v.3 also. Jesus’ advice “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny”⁴ is usually taken in the context of human relations. But it applies also, and maybe foremost, to our relationship with God. To have to settle our account with God means being eternally lost.

4 A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing.

Enter the sluggard again. We find him popping up a total of thirteen times in *The Book of Proverbs*,⁵ usually to the annoyance of others, but here in the context of normal human activity. In *The King James Version* the first clause reads: “The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold.” The Hebrew word *choreph* maybe better rendered “cold season,” “autumn,” or “winter.” The idea is that there is a good season for plowing, which the lazy person neglects under the pretense of hardship. Transposing this truth from the field of agriculture to spiritual life, we understand that God holds us responsible for failing to prepare ourselves to bear fruit. The only ground in Jesus’ *Parable of the Sower* that benefited from the Word sown in

1. From “The Business of Heaven.”

2. Prov. 19:12

3. Amos 1:2

4. See Matt. 5:25,26

5. See Prov. 6:6,9; 10:26; 13:4; 15:19; 19:24; 22:13; 24:30; 26:13,14,15,16.

it was the ground that was prepared.¹ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Melancthon, who said: “The shrinking from the cold is the avoiding the cross.”

5 *The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.*

6 *Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?*

7 *The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him.*

8 *When a king sits on his throne to judge, he winnows out all evil with his eyes.*

9 *Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin"?*

The Hebrew word for “purposes” is *etsah* which can be rendered “advice,” or “plan.” If we take it in the sense of “counsel” we usually see it as a second person’s advice; when it means, “plan” we mean the first person. In the first sense we find it in the verse: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the *counsel* of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.”² The second sense is expressed in the verse: “The LORD foils *the plans* of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But *the plans* of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.”³

The question regarding v.5 is who does the drawing out of man’s purposes, the person himself or someone else? It is true that no one fully knows himself. Our sub-conscience is like deep water of which the bottom cannot be fathomed. What Paul says about our knowledge of God that it also reveals that we do not know ourselves as God knows us. We read: “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”⁴ It does not appear that Solomon speaks here about the practice of psychology, but about what divine wisdom will do to our self-knowledge. If we come to the place where David came when he acknowledged: “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD,”⁵ our intimacy with God will grow.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases v.6: “Lots of people claim to be loyal and loving, but where on earth can you find one?” The Hebrew text reads literally: “Most men will proclaim his own goodness: everyone but a faithful man who can find?” The word “his own goodness” is the Hebrew word *checed*, which is also used for God’s covenant love; it is sometimes rendered “lovingkindness.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “The contrast is between profession and reality, not between goodness (*chesed*) and faithfulness, both of which contain the idea of steadfastness.” The principle reveals itself in our human relationships as well as in our relationship with God. Not all marriage vows lead to conjugal faithfulness and happiness and our confession of love to God must be backed up by obedience. As Jesus says: “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”⁶

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The Authorized Version pronounces that men are ready enough to parade and boast of their liberality, like the hypocrites who were said proverbially to sound a trumpet when they performed their alms deeds (...Matthew 6:2). Commenting on the Greek rendering of the clause given above, St. Chrysostom observes, ‘This is the true character of man to be merciful; yea, rather the character of God to show mercy...Those who answer not to this description, though they partake of

1. Matt. 13:3-8, 18-23

2. Ps. 1:1

3. Ps. 33:10,11

4. I Cor. 13:12

5. Ps. 139:1-4

6. John 14:15

mind, and are never so capable of knowledge, the Scripture refuses to acknowledge them as men, but calls them dogs, and horses, and serpents, and foxes, and wolves, and if there be any animals more contemptible.’ ” We do well to recognize that few of our acts of love, if any, are free of mixed motives. Most of the deep waters of our hearts are murky at best.

V.7 depicts a perfect condition which may be hard to find on earth. But we see that even if righteousness is imperfect, it will benefit our children. Since true righteousness is imputed, that is it is not our own but given to us by God, it contains the admission that we do not have any in ourselves. Since knowledge of salvation comes from the forgiveness of our sins, according to Zechariah in his hymn of praise,¹ the best we can do for our children is to show them how we received forgiveness.

The Hebrew of v.8 reads literally: “A king that sits in his throne of judgment scatters away with his eyes all evil.” The Hebrew word *zarah* means “to toss about,” or “to diffuse.” The verse seems to say more about the evil people than about the king. It reminds us of the statement in the first psalm: “Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.”² The King of kings does not need the evidence that is needed in a human court of judgment to make His case. He knows without hard proof. The fact that the wind will pick up the chaff and leaves the kernel is proof enough.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “See here an adumbration of the characteristic of the Messiah, the great King whose ‘eyes behold, whose eyelids try, the children of men’ (...Psalm 11:4): who is ‘of purer eyes than to behold evil’ (...Habakkuk 1:13); who ‘with righteousness shall judge the poor and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth; and with the breath of his lips shall slay the wicked’ (...Isaiah 11:4; comp. ...Matthew 3:12). Septuagint, ‘When the righteous king shall sit upon his throne, nothing that is evil shall offer itself before his eyes.’ ” The verses in Isaiah and Matthew read respectively: “but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.”³ And: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”⁴

Kings and judges on earth reflect in the administration of their office the principle that will be fully demonstrated on the Day of Judgment. This does not mean, of course, that human justice should be carried out without the need of presenting a burden of proof.

V.9 not only looks back to the truth of v.7, but it also draws the conclusion of the previous verse. We ought to ask ourselves the question: “Have I kept my heart pure; am I clean and without sin?” It is important that we do not hide in a sea of anonymity, comforting ourselves with the thought that no one is perfect and that consequently it does not matter. Without conviction of sin, confession and repentance, we will perish. A confrontation with God’s glory will make us cry out with Isaiah: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips.”⁵ We need the weight of God’s glory to prevent us from being gone with the wind on the Day of Judgment. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* answers Solomon’s question with: “No man. But thousands can testify that the blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed them from all unrighteousness. And he is pure from his sin, who is justified freely through the redemption that is in Jesus.”

10 Differing weights and differing measures — the LORD detests them both.

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1. See Luke 1:77.
 2. Ps. 1:4
 3. Isa. 11:4
 4. Matt. 3:12
 5. Isa. 6:5

We find the truth of this verse three times in *The Book of Proverbs*.¹ If our being a new creation in Christ does not demonstrate itself in the way we conduct business, we must consider ourselves among those whose faith is dead. In the words of James: “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” And: “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”²

11 Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right.

The Hebrew word for “actions” is *ma`alal*, which besides meaning “an act,” can also be rendered “invention.” One Bible scholar (Ewald) suggests that it can mean “play,” but it has been objected that the word does not have that meaning in any other context. We must admit though that typical child behavior is expressed in the form of play. That which is relaxation to an adult means preparation for adult life to a child. We know that even in the animal world kittens and puppies develop their hunting skills by playing. So whether the Hebrew word carries that meaning or not, it makes sense to predict what the adult will be by looking at the way the child plays.

We must also understand that in our life on earth we are like children preparing themselves for eternity. The way we do our business on earth determines what role we will play hereafter. We may not consider this to be play, but maybe God looks upon it as such. Otherwise, what do we do with Jesus’ words: “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?”³

12 Ears that hear and eyes that see — the LORD has made them both.

The Hebrew is actually more expressive in “The hearing ear and the seeing eye the Lord has made even both of them.” The author does not merely mention two important body parts, but he emphasizes the importance of them functioning properly. We receive our most important stimuli in life through our ears and our eyes. A deaf or blind person has to develop a collateral as a supplementary organ to be able to function properly. The Hebrew words for “hear” and “see” are *shama`* and *ra`ah*. *Shama`* has the meaning of “hearing intelligently” and *ra`ah* implies evaluation as in the verse: “God saw that the light was good.”⁴ This verse speaks about more than about sound and light and our ability to observe them. It refers to our capability to obey and distinguish between good and evil. And it emphasizes the fact that these abilities are God-given. The Apostle Paul elaborates on this by saying: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”⁵

13 Do not love sleep or you will grow poor; stay awake and you will have food to spare.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “Love not sleep lest you come to poverty; open your eyes and you shall be satisfied with bread.” This is not about sleeping or staying awake but about laziness and energy. Most of the Bible’s admonitions seem to point in the opposite direction from this verse. “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat — for he grants sleep to those he loves.”⁶ Jesus also seems to

1. See Prov. 11:1; 20:23.
2. James 2:17,26
3. Luke 16:10-12
4. Gen. 1:4
5. Eph. 2:10

say that the watchfulness propagated by the author of Proverbs is unwarranted and an indicator of a lack of faith in God's provisions. In *The Sermon on the Mount*, He says: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."¹

It is true that faith in God will free us from worrying about our needs, but that is different from becoming lazy. The human body is created in such a way that it needs sleep to replenish. Wearing ourselves out in trying to do what God promised to do for us is sin and puts us on the same level as the pagans. But waiting for God to do what we must do ourselves means falling into the trap on the opposite side of the road. After all, we do live in a hostile world. God feeds the bird but the birds must seek their food and scratch the soil. The Apostle Paul advised the Christians in Thessalonica: "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.' We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right."²

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments on this verse: "Sleep, indescribable in its nature, is an indescribable blessing; but how often is it turned into a curse! It is like food; a certain measure of it restores and invigorates exhausted nature; more than that oppresses and destroys life. A lover of sleep is a paltry, insignificant character."

Even more important than the physical application is the spiritual relevance of this verse. Since we live in a fallen world where bread is eaten by the sweat of our brow, and we are on constant foot of war with a powerful enemy, we need to be watchful and prayerful. Spiritual laziness is a deadly sin for it will lead to death. That is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the Christians in Rome: "And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."³

14 "It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.

15 Gold there is, and rubies in abundance, but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel.

16 Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger; hold it in pledge if he does it for a wayward woman.

17 Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man, but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel.

The Book of Proverbs has much to say about fraudulent sellers; here Solomon focuses on dishonest buyers. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases v.14: "The shopper says: 'That's junk – I'll take it off your hands,' then goes off boasting of the bargain." Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: "We may find here a sketch; also a businessman's warning to the inexperienced; perhaps, too, a parable, for there are also immaterial assets which we can be talked into selling lightly (Heb.12:16)." The verses in Hebrews reads: "See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son."⁴

6. Ps. 127:2

1. See Matt. 6:25,26, 31-34.

2. II Thess. 3:10-13

3. Rom. 13:11,12

This verse deals with more than bargaining, which I enjoyed doing, especially in the Far East where the merchants raise their price when they see a foreigner coming. I do not believe this proverb condemns that practice. This does not mean that bargain hunting is a sin, but deceiving a person, who makes his living by running a shop, certainly is. This can take various forms. Some people feel that returning a purchased item to a large department store that has an easy return policy, even though the article is not faulty, or after getting all the use wanted out of it, is not unscrupulous. After all, supermarkets are no poor widows! But honesty ought to be as blind as justice, whether the recipient is poor or rich.

The principle may become one of life and death if we transpose it to the spiritual realm, as Derek Kidner suggests. We cannot bargain with God and act as if His grace is cheap.

We find this notion of dishonesty repeated in all of the four verses above. The word translated “knowledge” in v.15 is interesting. The Hebrew word is *da`ath*, which has a variety of meaning. It is used in the opening verses of *The Book of Proverbs*.¹ We observed there that *da`ath*, is what a young man must acquire in order to live according to the will of God. Sometimes it is used to denote a God-given talent, as in the verse: “See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and *knowledge* in all kinds of crafts.”² Occasionally it is used in the almost opposite sense as “unintentionally,” as in the verse: “Then Moses set aside three cities east of the Jordan, to which anyone who had killed a person could flee if he had *unintentionally* killed his neighbor without malice aforethought. He could flee into one of these cities and save his life.”³ Since v.15 is placed in the context of honesty, we may conclude that the author of Proverbs considers true honesty to be more rare than precious jewels. The human heart is unable to produce good without mixing it with ulterior motives. Unless the Holy Spirit burns the dross out of us, we will not be able to reflect any glory. We will go through life bargain hunting without obtaining anything of lasting value.

We find v.16 repeated word-for-word in a later chapter.⁴ *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “If a man is so weak and foolish as to become security for any one, and is unable to make good his engaged payment, let him lose his garment which the creditor would seize; his imprudence must bring its own punishment.” The object seems to be ill-advised use of one’s finances. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: “The design is to show graphically the risk of becoming surety for another; if, as usually happens, the debtor fail to pay, the surety must, in his stead, fall under the power of the creditor.” The second part of the proverb mentions “a wayward woman,” that is a prostitute. But the word “wayward,” Hebrew: *nokriy*, can simply mean “foreigner” without reference to sex. For instance David says about himself: “I am a stranger to my brothers, *an alien* to my own mother’s sons.”⁵

V.17 complements an earlier statement: “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!”⁶ That is what the enemy whispers in our ear. And often he finds a well-tuned sounding board inside our heart. The impression that holiness is dull and sin is exciting has entrenched itself deeply in the human mind as a result of well-planned and executed demonic propaganda. All the corruption and decay of creation began “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, [and] she took some and ate it.”⁷

4. Heb.12:16
1. See Prov. 1:4.
2. Ex. 31:2,3
3. Deut. 4:41,42
4. See Prov. 27:13.
5. Ps. 69:8
6. See Prov. 9:17.
7. Gen. 3:6

18 Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance.
19 A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.

We read earlier: “For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.”¹ Both proverbs deal with more than war strategy, as is clear from Jesus’ illustration about the cost of discipleship. Jesus says: “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”² All human wars are derived from the actual struggle between God and Satan. We read in Revelation: “And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down — that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”³ Wherever Satan and his minions are defeated on earth, human wars cease. It was our experience on the mission field in Indonesia that the preaching and acceptance of the Gospel put an end to tribal warfare.

On the other hand, once we declare ourselves to be on the Lord’s side, we discover that the war is not over for us. We will be under frequent and sometimes continuous attack. That is why the Apostle Paul writes: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”⁴ It is because of this circumstance that we must have a well-defined strategy to face the enemy. As followers of the Lamb we must know how to face the wolf. Some of the strategy is spelled out in v.19. Not all the enemy’s attacks are open and frontal. He prefers to fall upon us from the back. Gossip is one of his mightiest weapons. The verse not only warns us to stay away from people who talk too much, but it also tells us not to be a person who talks too much. We must not be the person people ought to avoid.

20 If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness.
21 An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning will not be blessed at the end.

Parental respect is part of the constitution of the Kingdom of Heaven. The fifth of *The Ten Commandments* reads: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”⁵ The commandment shows how important God considers the family to be in human society. He wants every family to be a nucleus of mutual love and respect. Jesus slated the Pharisees and scribes for circumventing this commandment. He said: “God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honor his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.”⁶

Not every curse consists of verbally sending someone to hell. Not every murder causes physical death. The Apostle John states: “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no

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1. Prov. 11:14
 2. Luke 14:31-33
 3. Rev. 12:7-9
 4. II Tim. 3:12
 5. Ex. 20:12
 6. Matt. 15:4-6

murderer has eternal life in him.”¹ Not every family knows mutual love. Some parents do not fulfill the role God assigned to them to model the love of God to their children. Consequently, children grow up without a notion of love. They grow up with the wrong picture and when they meet God’s love later on in life they fail to recognize it. But that does not release a child from loving and respecting his or her parents.

A later proverb paints a life-size portrait of the person who fails to love his parents and it highlights the background in a significant way. We read: “There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth; those whose eyes are ever so haughty, whose glances are so disdainful; those whose teeth are swords and whose jaws are set with knives to devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind.”² Nothing our parents ever did to us ought to bring us to disrespect them, let alone curse them. Curses tend to backfire. If our lamp is snuffed out in pitch darkness we find ourselves where we wanted our parents to go. Some Bible scholars interpret the image to mean that the person will have no posterity that will remember him. It is true that cursing the previous generation will leave the door open for demonic influences over the following generation. If we love our children, we must love our parents to begin with.

There is a connection between vv.20 and 21 in the inheritance that links one generation to another. Some children covet so strongly the wealth that is coming to them that they are willing to kill their parents for it, if not physically than verbally. That is what the younger son did in *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* when he said: “Father, give me my share of the estate.”³ Had it not been for the persistent love of the father, the boy would have lost his very life. If a family’s inheritance only consists in material good it makes them the poorest of all. *Young’s Literal Translation* renders the verse: “An inheritance gotten wrongly at first, even its latter end is not blessed.” We saw earlier: “Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow.”⁴

There is an implicit warning in this proverb about any kind of money that is easily gained. If gain is not the fruit of our labor, it tends to lose its value. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “God’s blessing is not in them, because they are not the produce of industry.” This verse also provides a good warning against playing the lottery.

22 Do not say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.

23 The LORD detests differing weights, and dishonest scales do not please him.

We find the same thought expressed in a later Proverb: “Do not say, ‘I’ll do to him as he has done to me; I’ll pay that man back for what he did.’”⁵ When we look at vv.22 and 23 as one unit we see that the context is a business transaction. Cheating someone who has cheated us does not settle any account but just adds one injury to another. Vengeance hurts both parties equally.

Vengeance is God’s exclusive prerogative. We read in Deuteronomy: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.”⁶ The Apostle Paul echoes these words in his Epistle to the Romans: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is

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1. I John 3:15
 2. Prov. 30:11-14
 3. Luke 15:12
 4. Prov. 13:11
 5. See Prov. 24:29.
 6. Deut. 32:35

hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ ”¹

Barnes' Notes observes: “Note that man is not told to wait on the Lord in expectation of seeing vengeance on his enemies, but ‘He shall save thee.’ The difference of the two hopes, in their effect upon the man’s character, is incalculable.”

24 A man’s steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?

25 It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.

We may say that v.24 states the principle and v.25 provides the illustration. A previous proverb expressed a similar thought: “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.”² We understand this to mean that we are not preprogrammed to follow a course from which no deviation is possible. When Cain became jealous of his brother Abel because of the different ways in which God treated their sacrifices, we read: “Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.’ ”³ Obviously, Cain had a choice; he certainly was not predestined by a higher power to murder his brother!

The Hebrew reads literally: “A man’s goings are of the Lord; how then can a man understand his own way?” The Hebrew word rendered “understand” is *biyn* of which we said earlier that it may be the most important word in *The Book of Proverbs*; it occurs more than thirty times in the book. It has the added shade of meaning of separating mentally, or the ability to look at things with an analytical mind.

What the verse seems to say is that obedience on the basis of trust in God is the only safe way to go through life. Making our choices in an analytical manner, weighing the pros and cons of things of which we cannot foresee the consequences may seem to be more responsible, but it is not. Consulting the One who has the overall picture is by far better than acting in the light of a vision that does not reveal the future.

This does not mean that faith is a leap in the dark, as some take it to be. We have been given enough indication who the God is in whom we put our trust to know that light will shine at the place where we have to take the next step. We have the clear promise of an earlier proverb: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”⁴ If we understand that God has placed us in this world at a specific place to play a particular role, we do well to learn what part we are meant to play.

This understanding will keep us from make hasty vows. For example, some young people, in their desire to lead a life of sexual purity, vow never to marry. That vow usually holds unto the right partner shows up. The only “something” we can dedicate safely to the Lord is ourselves, our own body. If we present our body as a living sacrifice, we will understand what the will for God is for our life.

26 A wise king winnows out the wicked; he drives the threshing wheel over them.

27 The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being.

28 Love and faithfulness keep a king safe; through love his throne is made secure.

A superficial glance at v.26 would make us believe that it speaks about punishing wicked people. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs* for instance, renders is: “A careful scrutiny, a wise leader makes a clean sweep of rebels and dolts.” But if we take the three verses together a deeper truth emerges before us.

1. Rom. 12: 17,19,20
2. Prov. 16:9
3. Gen. 4:6,7
4. Prov. 3:5,6

The word “winnow” in v.26 is the same as in v.8. The Hebrew word *zarah* literally means “to toss about.” In connection with v.8 we observed that it said more about the wicked than about the king. In v.26 the emphasis is clearly on what the king does with the wicked. The whole image is of a threshing floor in which grain is separated from chaff. We know that the line of separation between good and evil does not run between one person and another but through every human heart. No one is totally good or totally evil. This does not mean that there will be no separation between individuals on the Day of Judgment. Jesus says: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”¹ But v.26 does not refer to the world’s last day. As human beings we are like grain as it is harvested, a kernel wrapped in a hull. The grain must be separated by a process we call “threshing.” Warning Peter about the danger of denying Him, Jesus said: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.”² Satan was not interested in the kernel of Peter’s life, but Jesus was and He allowed the enemy to use his awful methods in order to bring out that which was of value in Peter’s life.

The threshing wheel and the lamp of the LORD are parallel images; they have the same function in a person’s life. A footnote in *The New International Version* gives the alternate reading: “The spirit of man is the LORD’s lamp.” It may be true that our spirit knows more about us than we are aware of, if we are left to ourselves to keep the right course in life, shipwreck seems unavoidable. Jeremiah prophesied: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”³ Satan may do the sifting, but it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who gathers the fruit of our life. We do well to allow Him full freedom to do so.

The reign of an earthly king must be characterized by “love and faithfulness.” The Hebrew words are *chesed* and *emeth*, “lovingkindness and truth.” Both words are divine attributes. The king who reigns by the grace of God will demonstrate the grace of God in his reign. That makes the threshing wheel in v.26 not an instrument of punishment but an implement of harvest. As God allowed Satan to sift Peter in order to make him a better person, so will He allow the enemy of our souls to winnow out the chaff of our life, so that only the fruit will remain.

29 The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old.

The fact that this proverb is incorporated in *The Book of Proverbs* suggests that a generation gap is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the ages young people have looked at the older generation with suspicion and vice versa. The younger generation once said that they never ought to trust anyone over thirty. Most of them outgrew that stage and became part of the generation that can no longer be trusted.

The Hebrew words *tiph’arah* and *hadar* both refer to an ornament. But the latter seems to express more the honor and majesty. The beauty of youth expresses itself in outward form and inward energy. Old age makes people seldom physically beautiful but accumulation of years can produce wisdom and maturity. In this proverb Solomon invites us to appreciate that which is beautiful in each other in order to bridge the gap, which criticism tends to widen.

30 Blows and wounds cleanse away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being.

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1. Matt. 25:31,32
 2. Luke 22:31,32
 3. Jer. 17:9,10

The Hebrew is more colorful than the English translation can convey. “The blueness of a wound cleanses away evil: so do stripes the inward part of the belly.” As in v.27, “the inward parts of the belly” is a figure of speech for “inmost being.”

The verse, obviously, refers to corporal punishment, which makes the conscience aware of its moral failures and leads to confession and repentance. In an age in which the whip has been outlawed and parents are taken to court for spanking their children, Solomon’s statement seems crude, primitive and outdated. The fact that God often uses physical pain to catch our attention becomes thus shrouded in mist.

We must understand that pain serves a function in daily life. A body that is unable to feel pain, like that of a leprosy patient, is in danger of losing some of its members. God installed pain as a safety device in our bodies for our protection. Sometimes it is necessary to set off the alarm to warn us of moral and spiritual dangers. That is the purpose of corporal punishment. Outlawing spankings means unplugging a device that could save lives.

The Pulpit Commentary quotes from Pope Gregory’s *Morals on the Book of Job*: “By the blueness of a wound he implies the discipline of blows on the body. But blows in the secret parts of the belly are the wounds of the mind within, which are inflicted by compunction. For as the belly is distended when filled with food, so is the mind puffed up when swollen with wicked thoughts. The blueness, then, of a wound, and blows in the secret parts of the belly, cleanse away evil, because both outward discipline does away with faults, and compunction pierces the distended mind with the punishment of penance. But they differ from each other in this respect, that the wounds of blows give us pain, the sorrows of compunction have good savor. The one afflict and torture, the others restore when they afflict us. Through the one there is sorrow in affliction, through the other there is joy in grief.”

Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* brought to light how severely Jesus was beaten before His crucifixion. We do well to remember that His physical suffering opened the door of salvation for mankind. “His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness — But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”¹

11. Chapter Twenty-one

1 The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

2 All a man’s ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart.

3 To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

4 Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin!

5 The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.

The thread that ties these five verses together is the fulfillment of God’s will in and through the lives of men. We are not created as pre-programmed robots that have no choice but to do the will of God. We all have the option of disobedience. These verses touch upon the mystery of the accomplishment of God’s will by means of reluctant, recalcitrant, or rebellious subjects, not by divine veto but by working in all things for the good of those who love Him.² A classic example is found in Joseph’s statement to his brothers who had intended to kill him: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”³ Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on v.1: “This is a saying about providence, not regeneration. Tiglath-pileser (Is. 10:6,7), Cyrus (Is. 41:2-4) and Artaxerxes (Ezr. 7:21)

1. Isa. 52:14; 53:5,6

2. See Rom. 8:28.

3. Gen. 50:20

are all examples of autocrats who, in pursuing their chosen courses, flooded or fertilized God's field as He chose. This principle is still in force."

The fact that this section begins with the king indicates that God prioritizes the state of world politics. It may be hard for us to see God's hand in the wars that ravaged the twentieth century, but we have enough proof of God's wisdom to conclude that God uses human wrongs to reveal His goodness and justice. As the law of gravity takes over when water runs, so God's law of love and justice leads to the fulfillment of His plan in all acts of humanity, whether meant for good or evil. When we work against God we will always lose, when we submit to His will, we have already won.

V.2 repeats the thought of an earlier proverb: "All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD."¹ Actually, we find the theme repeated several times with different emphases in *The Book of Proverbs*. The statement "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" occurs twice.² The mystery is also touched upon in "A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?"³ The human problem is rooted in the fact that we live in time and God exists in eternity. We may know what has happened but we cannot be sure of what will happen. To act as if we know the future is foolishness, yet we are supposed to plan and prepare for that future. God will judge us according to the light we have and on the basis of the sincerity of our motives. But that is no guarantee of success. Divine wisdom will always demonstrate itself if we do not lean on our own understanding but acknowledge God in all our ways.⁴

The verse obviously refers to the motivation of our good deeds. We conclude this from the fact that, in our own judgment, we believe we do the right thing but God looks below the surface to our reasons for doing so. This puts the matter in a negative framework. We can do the right thing for the wrong reason. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us two examples in the almsgiving and prayers of the hypocrites. The Greek word *hupokrites*, from which the English word "hypocrite" is taken, literally means "an actor," someone who plays a character other than his own. We read Jesus' warning: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them," and "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."⁵

V.3 reminds us of Samuel's words to King Saul who had disobeyed God and who, instead of confessing his sin, tried to pacify God with some sacrifice: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."⁶ In this verse the theme is again motivation. God does not object to sacrifices; He commanded them to be brought. But sacrifices that are not brought to expiate a fault but to cover it up are brought for the wrong reason. A woman will be pleased when her husband gives her flowers because he loves her. But if he gives her a diamond brooch because he committed adultery and does not want her to know, the matter is quite different.

The disputed word in v.4 is the Hebrew word *nivr*, which literally means "plowing" or "freshly plowed land." Most modern Bible scholars believe that the word should be *ner*, which means "a lamp." Either word does not help us much to penetrate into the meaning of this proverb. Eugene H. Peterson's paraphrase, in *Proverbs*, gives it the idea of evidence, obviously interpreting the Hebrew word as "lamp." We read: "Arrogance and pride—distinguishing marks in the wicked—are just plain sin." There is biblical evidence that "lamp" may have the meaning of life and hope.⁷ On that basis Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*,

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1. Prov. 16:2
 2. Prov. 14:12; 16:25
 3. Prov. 20:24
 4. See Prov. 3:5,6.
 5. Matt. 6:1,5
 6. I Sam. 15:22

states: “For the godly, these are God-given; for the wicked, manmade.” In *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus gives new dimensions to the word “lamp” by equating it with the human spirit. We read: “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”¹ God communicates with us through our spirit. But if the lamp within us is snuffed out, communication is non-existent.

“The plans” in v.5 are evidently those plans that are made in consultation with God. The suggestion is that the making of such plans takes time. This is obvious from the second clause of the proverb. The Hebrew word, rendered “haste” is *uwts*, which means “to press” or “to hurry.” The word does not have a positive connotation in *The Book of Proverbs* as is evident from these other proverbs: “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.”² “A faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished.”³ “Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”⁴ George Mueller, who in the nineteenth century built five orphanages in Bristol, England, simply by prayer, testified that it often took him more time to find out the will of the Lord in certain matters than, once having received certainty, it took him to see the answer of his prayer. The Bible links haste to unbelief, as in the verse: “Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation, a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.”⁵

6 A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare.

7 The violence of the wicked will drag them away, for they refuse to do what is right.

8 The way of the guilty is devious, but the conduct of the innocent is upright.

These three verses describe those who resist the will of God in their lives. V.6 shows the other side of the coin we saw in v.5. Not all ungodly behavior leads to poverty, as a matter of fact some people who want to get rich quickly and who have no scruples in reaching their goal are quite successful. But that road is full of dangers that are not visible to the naked eye. The Hebrew text reads literally: “The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that seek death.” The fleeting vapor is not just a quick-lifting mist but a cloud of poisonous gas. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Some think that the comparison regards the mirage of the desert, which deceives travelers with the phantasms of cool waters and refreshing shade. Such an allusion is found in ... Isaiah 35:7. The Talmud enjoins, ‘Speak no word that accords not with the truth, that thy honor may not vanish as the waters of a brook.’” The quotation from Isaiah reads: “The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.”⁶ It is obvious, though, that Isaiah’s prophecy can also be interpreted in quite a different way.

The Hebrew of v.7 reads literally: “The robbery of the wicked shall destroy them because they refuse judgment.” The Hebrew word rendered “violence” in *The New International Version* and “robbery” in *The King James Version* is *shod*, which means “violence,” or “ravage.” *The New International Version* does render it “loot” in “‘They do not know how to do right,’ declares the LORD, ‘who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses.’”⁷ The clause “because they refuse judgment” is understood by some Bible scholars

7. See II Sam. 21:17; I Kings 11:36.

1. Matt. 6:22,23

2. Prov. 19:2

3. Prov. 28:20

4. Prov. 29:20

5. Isa. 28:16 (KJV) – the NIV reads: “The one who trusts will never be dismayed”.

6. Isa. 35:7

as referring to judges who refuse to carry out their responsibilities but use their office for their own profit. The more modern interpretation of the text makes it fit better in the context. The picture is of unscrupulous people who do not refrain from robbing others to become rich.

The difficult word in v.8 is the Hebrew word *vazar*, which only occurs in this verse in the Bible. *The King James Version* renders it “strange,” but modern Bible scholars interpret it as “guilty,” or “crooked.” *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes the Psalm verse “to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd”¹ and comments: “God allows the wicked to punish themselves by falling into mischief.” Eugene H. Petersen, in *Proverbs*, gives the interesting paraphrase: “Mixed motives twist life into tangles; pure motives take you straight down the road.”

9 Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.

The New Living Translation reads: “It is better to live alone in the corner of an attic than with a contentious wife in a lovely home.” The exact same thought is repeated in Chapter 25:24.² It is important to approach this verse with caution. We must not get lost in the gender difference between the person who withdraws to the rooftop and the grouchy one who takes up comfortable space inside. The way the verse reads indicates that it was written by a male person, living in a man’s world. Millions of women, however, could testify against their drunken husbands who made life unbearable to them. As Derek Kidner explains in *Proverbs*, the verse expresses more than anything else “the choice between ignominious solitude and intolerable society.”

The Apostle Paul looks at the principle from a different angle when he advises those who are married to unbelieving spouses. We read: “To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”³

10 The wicked man craves evil; his neighbor gets no mercy from him.

11 When a mocker is punished, the simple gain wisdom; when a wise man is instructed, he gets knowledge.

12 The Righteous One takes note of the house of the wicked and brings the wicked to ruin.

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, *The Septuagint* renders v.10: “The soul of the ungodly shall not be pitied by any one.” The Hebrew text reads literally: “The soul of the wicked desires evil; his neighbor finds no favor in his eyes.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* points out: “There is a play on words. In Hebrew, ‘wicked’ and ‘neighbor’ sound alike.” The Hebrew words are respectively *rasha`* (wicked person) and *rea`* (neighbor). The verse seems to go beyond the everyday manifestations of sinful human nature to sadism. This person enjoys making people suffer. In the heart of such a person no trace is left of love or compassion. Selfishness will eventually lead to murder. The Apostle John shows the outcome of a loveless

7. Amos 3:10

1. Ps. 18:26

2. We find the same thought also in different words in 12:4; 19:13; 27:15,16.

3. I Cor. 7:12-16

attitude in his statement: “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”¹ Those who murder others actually kill themselves in the process.

V.10 repeats an earlier stated truth: “Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence; rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge.”² The truth that is repeated is that punishment of one may be a deterrent for someone else, for “the simple” the *pethiy*, the person without moral direction and inclined to evil, the one we called earlier “naif.” The wise person, however, does not need harsh measures to catch his attention. God will not have to shout at him. He will recognize his need by simply listening. It takes wisdom to become wise. Young King Solomon gave evidence of wisdom when he prayed God to give him wisdom to rule the nation of Israel.³

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases v.10 – “Simpletons only learn the hard way, but the wise learn by listening.”

The Hebrew of v.12 reads literally: “The righteous man considers wisely the house of the wicked: but God overthrows the wicked for their wickedness.” But the words “man” and “God” are arbitrarily added to the text to provide it with sense. The problem is obviously that a human being, even if he is righteous, does not possess the power to cause the fall of the wicked. According to *The Pulpit Commentary* “The Vulgate refers the passage to the zeal of the righteous for the salvation of sinners — a thought quite foreign to the present subject — thus: ‘The righteous man reflects concerning the house of the wicked how he may deliver them from *evil*.’ ... The LXX interprets ‘the house’ as heart and conscience, and renders, ‘A righteous man understands the hearts of the godless, and despises the impious in their wickednesses;’ he sees through their outward felicity, knows well its unreality, and despises them for the low aims and pursuits which satisfy them.”

There is a sense in which the righteousness of one person can add to the unrighteousness of another. This can be concluded from Jesus’ words: “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”⁴ And: “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.”⁵

13 If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.

This verse shows the other side of the coin that was shown earlier: “He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.”⁶ As Christians we are under obligation to practice social justice and compassion. The person in this verse is not unaware of his neighbor’s need but he purposely makes himself deaf to the cry for help. James uses this picture as an illustration of how genuine faith ought to demonstrate itself. We read: “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical

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1. I John 3:15
 2. Prov. 19:25
 3. See I Kings 3:7-12.
 4. Matt. 11:20-24
 5. Matt. 12:42
 6. See Prov. 19:17

needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”¹ And the Apostle John states: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”²

The best illustration of this proverb is found in Jesus’ *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus*, where Abraham replies to the rich man’s cry from hell: “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.”³

14 A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath.

15 When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.

The Book of Proverbs has a lot to say about the danger of bribing. We read the following warnings: “A greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribes will live.”⁴ “A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds.”⁵ “A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice.”⁶ “By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down.”⁷ Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, remarks about v.14 – “Here the neutral term *gift* (*mattān*) is coupled with the bad term *bribe* (RSV; *sōhad*), a reminder that the boundary between the two is thin at the best of times, and is crossed at this point by the secrecy of the transaction.”

It is the following verse that places the deal in the context of justice. It also suggests that bad secrets are never safe. Human righteousness may be corrupt and some judges may be willing to bend the law when it benefits them, but it is ultimately God’s justice that will prevail and we do well to subject our human relationships to that truth. If anger can be bribed it is not righteous anger. The person who soothes anger with a bribe pays for unrighteousness.

16 A man who strays from the path of understanding comes to rest in the company of the dead.

17 He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.

18 The wicked become a ransom for the righteous, and the unfaithful for the upright.

The Hebrew text of v.16 reads literally: “The man that wanders out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, calls this “Moral wanderlust.” He states: “Every word of the second line is charged with irony. The rebel who must roam at will, is only hastening to lose his mobility (*shall rest*, RV), in his independence (*in the congregation*, AV, RV) and his life (*of the dead*).” Ironically, young people tend to leave the path of wisdom because they think it will not lead them to real life. A Dutch poet wrote: “I want to live a grandiose and inspiring life. Do you hear that, father, mother, house of dead bones?”

The path of understanding is the path of wisdom or intelligence. As we saw earlier, the Hebrew word *sakal* means wisdom that makes one successful. The path suggests progress, one’s way through life, which is either followed by the compass of wisdom, or from which one strays. It is wisdom in its practical

1. James 2:14-17
2. I John 3:17,18
3. Luke 16:25
4. Prov. 15:27
5. Prov. 17:8
6. Prov. 17:23
7. Prov. 29:4

form. James gives us a clear definition of wisdom: “The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”¹

V.17 reveals one reason some people decide to leave the path of wisdom: love of pleasure. The Hebrew word for “pleasure” is *simchah* which covers all kinds of enjoyment, good or bad. We find it in the context of fellowship with God as in the verse: “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with *joy* in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”² The question is not whether it is bad to experience joy, but whether we want pleasure for pleasure’s sake alone. Joy is a by-product of fellowship with God, and if we seek the experience without the fellowship we stray from the path of wisdom. That tendency makes some people pray for revival or for the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. Wine and oil are symbols of the good life. Eugene H. Peterson captures well the meaning of this verse with his paraphrase: “You’re addicted to thrills? What an empty life! The pursuit of pleasure is never satisfied.”

The difficult word in v.18 is the Hebrew word *kopher*, which has a variety of meanings. It stands for any kind of cover, from the bitumen Noah used to cover the ark,³ to ransom money, as in the verse “When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a *ransom* for his life at the time he is counted,”⁴ to the taking of a bribe as in “For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take *bribes* and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.”⁵ None of these uses of the word provide us much help to catch the meaning of the proverb *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “An unusual thought and unusual use of ransom. The LXX has offscouring, evidently interpreting the verse to mean that the wicked are but refuse in contrast to the righteous. The general sense of the verse is that the bad and not the good suffer judgment... In Isa 43:3-4 the word is used of God’s judgment on Egypt in order to deliver Israel.”

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “This saying (with 11:8) acts as a pointer to the paradox of the atonement, in that it defines those who might fairly be called ‘expendable’ members of society.” Proverbs 11:8 reads: “The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The faithless takes the place of the upright; the stroke passes over the latter, to fall on the former, as in Egypt the destroying angel spared the houses of the Israelites, and poured his wrath on the Egyptians.”

19 Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife.

The Book of Proverbs has both good and bad things to say about a man’s wife. It reflects the fact that the book is written by a man from the perspective of a man’s world. The author’s tendency to return to the subject of the woman who is hard to live with sounds itself as the “constant dripping” which the woman is supposed to be like. We read that a disgraceful wife is like decay in her husband’s bones,⁶ like “a constant dripping.”⁷ The poor husband is said to be better off living “on a corner of the roof,”⁸ or, like in the above verse, “in a desert.” As we observed earlier, some evidence has been suppressed, because there are probably as many cases of male obnoxiousness as of female nagging. What is not mentioned is that the wife in the man’s world did not have the same option to remove herself from the center of contention as the husband

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1. James 3:17,18
 2. Ps. 16:11
 3. See Gen. 6:14.
 4. Ex. 30:12
 5. Amos 5:12
 6. Prov. 12:4
 7. Prov. 19:13; 27:15
 8. Prov. 21:9

did. Fortunately, *The Book of Proverbs* gives the good wife equal time and her praises are sung eloquently in the last chapter of the book. Marriage, the bond for life between a man and a woman reflects the spiritual unity between Christ and the church, according to the Apostle Paul.¹ Unfortunately, no perfect examples can be found in the world in which we presently live.

20 In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.

21 He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor.

In a literal sense v.20 in a way offsets the negative picture of the woman in the previous verse. “The wise” may be the husband, but in most families storage of food and oil is mother’s work. The foolish husband is seen as the one who spends it, leaving behind an empty cupboard. The Hebrew text reads literally: “There is treasure to be desired and oil in the dwelling of the wise; but a foolish man spends it all.” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It is obvious to apply the maxim to spiritual things, seeing in it the truth that the really wise man stores up treasures of Divine love and the oil of God’s grace, while the foolish man wastes his opportunities, squanders his powers, and drives the Holy Spirit from him.”

The prosperity and honor in v.21 are a material expression of spiritual blessing. The way to obtain these blessings is to pursue righteousness and love. The Hebrew words express more than the English can render. “Righteousness” is *tsedaqah* and “love” is *checed*. The righteousness is the moral rectitude that gives to the poor. We find the concept in Jesus’ words about almsgiving: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.”² *Chesed* is the word that is often rendered “lovingkindness,” referring to God’s covenant love, the love with which He pledged Himself to us.

Pursuing righteousness and love requires the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human heart. God is the ultimate Giver and Lover. “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”³

22 A wise man attacks the city of the mighty and pulls down the stronghold in which they trust.

23 He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.

24 The proud and arrogant man — “Mocker” is his name; he behaves with overweening pride.

King Solomon comes back to the theme of v.22 in Ecclesiastes. We read: “Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city.”⁴ And: “I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, ‘Wisdom is better than strength.’ But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.”⁵

These three verses, however, deal more with victorious living than with wisdom and physical strength. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “The truth that wisdom may succeed where brute force fails (cf. 24:5,6), has many applications, not least to spiritual warfare. But in the realm, earthly wisdom avails nothing: 2 Corinthians 10:4.” The verses in Proverbs Kidner refers to read: “A wise man has great power,

1. See Eph. 5:21-33.

2. Matt. 6:1

3. James 1:17,18

4. Eccl. 7:19

5. Eccl. 9:13-18

and a man of knowledge increases strength; for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers.” And the Pauline quotation reads: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.”

V.23 outlines the inner preparation needed for spiritual victories. We read earlier: “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.”¹ James has a lot to say about the sins of the tongue.² We quote some excerpts: “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.” “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” “No man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.” Victorious living begins with victory over self. This can only be achieved by an act of surrender to the Holy Spirit. David’s prayer: “Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips” is the key to all other victories. All this is part of the acquisition of wisdom.

V.24 points to the person who refuses to surrender his tongue to the control of the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew reads literally: “Proud and haughty scorner is his name, who deals proud in wrath.” The Hebrew words rendered “proud” and “haughty” are *zed* and *yahiyr*. Both can be rendered “arrogant.” We find the word *zed* in David’s prayer: “Keep your servant also from *willful* sins; may they not rule over me.”³ *The King James Version* uses the word “presumptuous.” The word *yahiyr* is only found twice in the Old Testament. In Habakkuk it is used in connection with the Babylonian king who was about to fall upon Judah. Nebuchadnezzar’s arrogance is described as a form of intoxication. We read: “Wine betrays him; he is *arrogant* and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.”⁴ There is an obvious difference in degree between the “presumptuous sin” David speaks of and the arrogance of King Nebuchadnezzar. One highly decorated army general in World War Two, was once asked if he was prepared to meet God when he died.⁵ He answered that he was prepared to meet God, but he did not know if God would be prepared to meet him!

The “scorner” is the one who “makes mouths at,” in Hebrew *luwts*. This refers to a person who unsuccessfully makes an effort to pronounce a foreign language. It is the use of scorn that tries to cover up a lack of ability. Scorn can be an effective mask for failure.

25 The sluggard’s craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work.

26 All day long he craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing.

We meet “the sluggard” or “the slothful” again and again. The Hebrew word *’atsel* is found at least fourteen times in *The Book of Proverbs*.⁶ In the introductory section of his book *Proverbs*, Derek Kidner states about the sluggard: “The sluggard in Proverbs is a figure of tragic-comedy, with his sheer animal laziness (he is more than anchored to his bed; he is *hinged* to it, 26:14), his preposterous excuses (‘there is a lion outside!’ 26:13; 22:13) and his final helplessness. 1. *He will not begin things* ... 2. *He will not finish things* ... 3. *He will not face things* ... 4. Consequently he is *restless* (13:4; 21:25,26) with unsatisfied desire; *helpless* in face of the tangle of his affairs, which are like a ‘hedge of thorns’ (15:19); and *useless* – expensively (13:9) and exasperatingly (10:26) – to any who must employ him.” This “Lazyboy” lives in a

1. Prov. 16:32

2. See James 3:1-12.

3. Ps. 19:13

4. Hab. 2:5

5. See Amos 4:12.

6. See Prov. 6:6; 6:9; 10:26; 13:4; 15:19; 19:24; 20:4; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30; 26:13,14,15,16.

dream world and refuses to wake up for fear that action may be required of him. Like a drug addict he indulges himself into death. Charles Dickens, in *The Pickwick Papers*, depicts him as a fat boy who is always found fallen asleep when he is supposed to be doing something.

The Hebrew keyword in v.25 is *ta'avah*, which in itself has the neutral meaning of “longing.” But it is usually found in the context of excess. We find it for the first time in the Bible in the context of temptation: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and *pleasing* to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”¹ This scene colors the meaning of the word for most of its use throughout Scripture. The desire of the lazy person is sinful and harmful. God expects us to be able to work for what we want. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica: “For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’”²

The second part of v.26 brings out the selfishness of the sluggard by contrasting it to the giving of the righteous. The irony of sinful longing is that it never finds full satisfaction. Fulfillment and happiness are found in giving, not in receiving. According to the Apostle Paul, “the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”³

27 The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable — how much more so when brought with evil intent!

28 A false witness will perish, and whoever listens to him will be destroyed forever.

29 A wicked man puts up a bold front, but an upright man gives thought to his ways.

30 There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD.

31 The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD.

The theme that links these verses together is the struggle with hypocrisy. In v.27 we are shown the pious mask a hypocrite wears. V.28 shows how he will end. V.29 depict the insecurity that feeds insincerity. In v.30 we learn that the hypocrite fights a losing battle, and v.31 lets us see how to overcome hypocrisy.

I like the blunt paraphrase of v.27 suggested by Eugene H. Peterson in *Proverbs*: “Religious performance by the wicked stinks; it’s even worse when they use it to get ahead.” In the Old Testament the bringer of a sacrifice would lay his hand on the head of the animal, indicating that he identified himself with it and that what happened to that creature happened to him by way of substitution. It implied the confession: “What happens to this lamb ought to happen to me; I am guilty and deserve the death penalty.” A sacrifice that was brought without this inner conviction was worthless. It was tantamount to striking a deal with God, as if the sinner were saying to God: “You take this and leave me my life.” As if God could be bribed! *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* correctly observes: “Many can freely give God their beasts, their lips, their knees, who would not give him their hearts.”

Only people who do not know who the God is they are dealing with, would try to make deals like that. Those who do not know God do not know themselves either. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the father Polonius advises his son Laertes: “This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.”

To bring a genuine sacrifice before God is one of the highest things a person can do in his life. Corruption of such an act is the worst kind of corruption one can imagine. In the words of Eugene H. Peterson, “It stinks!”

The Hebrew text reads v.28: “A false witness shall perish: but the man that hears speaks constantly.” *The New International Version* adds in a footnote: “Or / but the words of an obedient man will live on.”

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1. Gen. 3:6
 2. II Thess. 3:10
 3. Acts 20:35

The “witness” in v.28 is evidently the same hypocrite v.27 introduced. Here we see him perform, not before God but before man. The two relationships, with God and fellow humans, cannot be separated. Falsehood in human relations is the fruit of a wrong relationship with God. Those who try to fool God will also fool their fellowmen. Set in the context of a court hearing, a witness takes the oath that says that he will tell the truth, calling upon God as his witness. It is one thing to commit perjury before a human court, to make it appear as if the lie is the truth of God is the epitome of hypocrisy. The Hebrew is evidently open to various interpretations. *The New King James Version* reads: “A false witness shall perish, But the man who hears him will speak endlessly.” *The New Living Translation*: “A false witness will be cut off, but an attentive witness will be allowed to speak.” Derek Kinder, in *Proverbs*, gives this verse the heading “Accurate reporting.” He comments: “The key phrase is a man who hears: his first aim is to know and understand, not to grind some axe. It is not without relevance to Christian ‘witness’: the man who listens (Is. 50:4) is the man worth listening to.” The quoted verse from Isaiah reads: “The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.”¹

The verse has caught the attention of Bible scholars and some have written rather extensively about its meaning. *The Pulpit Commentary* states about this verse: “His testimony is worthless, and both he and it come to nothing. ‘The man that heareth’ is one who is attentive, who listens before he speaks, and reports only what he has heard. Such a one will speak ‘for continuance,’ so that what he says is never falsified, or silenced, or refuted ... Revised Version, *unchallenged*. The expression thus rendered is *lanetsach*, which means, in Hebrew at any rate, in *perpetuum*, ‘for continuance.’ But St. Jerome’s rendering has been much used by the Fathers, who have drawn there from lessons of obedience. St. Gregory, ‘Moral,’ 35:28, ‘An obedient man in truth speaketh of victories, because, when we humbly submit ourselves to the voice of another, we overcome ourselves in our heart.’ ”

We find the same contrast between the liar and the person who speaks the truth repeated in v.29, this time not particularly in the use of their words but in their general attitude. The Hebrew reads literally: “A wicked man hardens his face: but as for the upright he directs his way.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “The wicked is not to be shamed out of his wickedness. He pertinaciously and unblushingly adheres to it.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary observes: “Here is, 1. The presumption and impudence of a wicked man: He hardens his face - brazens it, that he may not blush - steels it, that he may not tremble when he commits the greatest crimes; he bids defiance to the terrors of the law and the checks of his own conscience, the reproofs of the word and the rebukes of Providence; he will have his way and nothing shall hinder him, Isa 57:17. 2. The caution and circumspection of a good man: As for the upright, he does not say, What would I do? What have I a mind to? and that will I have; but, What should I do? What does God require of me? What is duty? What is prudence? What is for edification? And so he does not force his way, but direct his way by a safe and certain rule.” The quotation from Isaiah, in the context in which it is given, reads: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me — the breath of man that I have created. I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways.”²

As v.30 states, fighting against God is a battle that is lost before it has begun. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, renders it: “Nothing clever, nothing conceived, nothing contrived, can get the better of God.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: “The saying can also be viewed as a complement to the motto-text of Proverbs, stating that in our outlook on life no true synthesis (*wisdom*), analysis (*understanding*, or, ‘insight’) or policy (*counsel*) can be arrived at in defiance of God.” Satan must know this truth, yet he persists in his rebellion, dragging millions of human beings along into perdition. The idea of outwitting an

1. Isa. 50:4

2. Isa. 57:15-17

all-knowing God, of evaluating what God has created and declaring it to be insufficient, of advising God of a better plan than His, is more than preposterous. To start a war with God is the quintessence of folly. There is great wisdom in our surrender to the Almighty. As Jesus says: "Suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."¹

V.31 certainly fits with the above quotation of Jesus' words. The mention of the warhorse gives us the impression that the verse deals with waging war with others. Our most desperate battle is often with ourselves and with the demonic seed of rebellion within us. Horses are rarely used anymore in warfare. Modern wars are fought with airplanes, tanks, and nuclear weapons. But the principle of making war has not changed. The United States of America considers itself to be the strongest nation in the world, well capable of defending itself against any offensive from outside. The war the USA is losing is the war within. The war we lose individually is the war with ourselves, unless the Lord gives us the victory. In a previous proverb we read: "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city."² The greatest victory one can win is victory over self, and only the Holy Spirit can give us that.

12. Chapter Twenty-two

1 A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

2 Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all.

3 A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

4 Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life.

5 In the paths of the wicked lie thorns and snares, but he who guards his soul stays far from them.

6 Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

In Ecclesiastes Solomon puts the truth of v.1 in the context of a funeral. We read: "A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth."³ The "fine perfume" in that verse is probably the spices used in embalment. If it is true in inter-human relations that "having a good name" is the most valuable asset, how much more in our relationship with God! The Apostle Paul uses this image in his Epistle to the Corinthians: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing."⁴ To put it bluntly, we can say that if God smells Christ in us, people will also.

The general theme of these six verses suggests that most human beings have their priorities wrong. We go after the wrong things in life. We think that being rich in earthly possession will give us a reputation, if not of being good, at least of having power. We may not say this in so many words, but we act as if God will then owe us the same respect people do. It is easy to overlook the fact that our possessions are what God loans us; we have to give it all back to Him when we leave this world. V.2 reminds us of this fact in an indirect way. For God it makes no difference how much we have; He only values what we are.

V.2 speaks about more than the common origin of mankind, it strongly suggests that God has something to do with the amount of our possessions. He knows that for some of us being rich would be our spiritual undoing. The Scottish writer George MacDonald believed that God made some people rich as a

1. Luke 14:31-33

2. Prov. 16:32

3. Eccl. 7:1

4. II Cor. 2:14,15

form of punishment. Undoubtedly, the poor will find more wisdom in this verse than the rich. Poor people tend to ask themselves the question “Why am I poor?” Rich people never question their position.

The Bible makes it abundantly clear, however, that the riches of some and the poverty of others is not God’s ideal for human society. The Old Testament law provided for a return of all lost property in the Year of Jubilee.¹ And one of the results of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the early church was a sharing of the wealth. We read in *The Book of Acts*: “There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”²

V.3 digs deeper into the concept of the person who acquires a good reputation. The Hebrew text reads literally: “A prudent man foresees the evil and hides himself: but the simple pass on and are punished.” He protects himself against the temptations and pitfalls in life by hiding in the Lord. He recognizes the dangers and realizes that he cannot face them alone. It is ultimately his fellowship with God that makes him a good person, who can face life. The simple, the *pethiy*, the one who is “without moral direction and inclined to evil” will refuse God’s protection and suffer the consequences. The same thought is repeated later on in the book.³

The Hebrew text of v.4 reads literally: “By humility (and) the fear of the Lord (are) riches, and honor, and life.” *The New International Version*’s reading suggests that wealth, honor and life are a recompense for humility and fear of the Lord. Although this may have been the predominant thought in the mind of the Old Testament person, the text could also mean that real wealth, honor and life consist in humility and fear of the Lord. David expressed a similar thought in one of his Psalms: “The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”⁴ And Jesus says: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”⁵ As in the previous verses in this section, the emphasis is on the quality of life rather than on the ease of it.

V.5 seems to contradict Jesus’ statement about the two gates and the two roads: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”⁶ In Jesus’ declaration the road that leads to destruction is the easy one, apparently without thorns and snares. We realize, however, that a snare is a device that is hidden from view. One only knows it is there after being caught in it. In reality everyone travels the same path through life. The difference between the wicked and the righteous is in the way they handle the thorns and snares. The secret is in the guarding of one’s soul. Those who know that their soul is their most precious possession will travel circumspectly; those who do not care about their soul have lost it already.

V.6 tells us that one is never too young to learn the lesson taught in the previous verses. Those who learn it later in life have so much collected garbage to dispose of that it makes conversion more difficult. It is comparatively easier for a young person to dedicate himself to God than for an older one. Some miracles do happen to people later in life.⁷ The Hebrew word translated “train” is *chanak*, which means literally “to narrow down,” or “to initiate.” Sometimes it is used in the sense of “to dedicate” as in the verse: “The officers shall say to the army: ‘Has anyone built a new house and not *dedicated* it? Let him go home, or he

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1. Lev. 25:10,13
 2. Acts 4:34,35
 3. See Prov. 27:12.
 4. Ps. 19:9-11
 5. Matt. 6:33
 6. Matt. 7:13,14
 7. See Acts 4:22.

may die in battle and someone else may dedicate it.’ ”¹ To “train a child in the way he should go” by dedicating him or her to the Lord makes beautiful sense. That is how all training of children by Christian parents should start.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The verb translated ‘train’ (*chanak*) means, first, ‘to put something into the mouth,’ ‘to give to be tasted,’ as nurses give to infants food which they have masticated in order to prepare it for their nurslings; thence it comes to signify ‘to give elementary instruction,’ ‘to imbue,’ ‘to train.’ The Hebrew literally is, *Initiate a child in accordance with his way*. The Authorized Version ... takes the maxim to mean that the child should be trained from the first in the right path — the path of obedience and religion. This is a very true and valuable rule, but it is not what the author intends. ‘His way’ must mean one of two things — either his future calling and station, or his character and natural inclination and capacity. ... But, as far as use is concerned, both explanations stand on much the same ground; and it seems more in conformity with the moralist’s age and nation to see in the maxim an injunction to consider the child’s nature, faculties, and temperament, in the education which is given to him. If, from his early years, a child is thus trained, **when he is old, he will not depart from it**. This way, this education in accordance with his idiosyncrasy, will bear fruit all his life long; it will become a second nature, and will never be obliterated.” *The Commentary* quotes proverbs from three different languages, which, translated from the German, read: “Young accustomed, old practiced.” Danish: “What youth learns, age does not forget.” And French: “If youth only knew! If old age only could!”

7 The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.

8 He who sows wickedness reaps trouble, and the rod of his fury will be destroyed.

9 A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.

It has been observed that in the Hebrew text “the rich” is singular and “the poor” plural, suggesting that riches provide power for one person over several others. The second clause of the proverb reveals how the system works, by means of lending and borrowing money. Christians have used this verse as a powerful practical tool in financial counseling. We are reminded of the advice Polonius gives to his son Laertes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “Neither a borrower nor a lender be; For loan oft loses both itself and friend, And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.”

The fact that money is often equated with power, accounts for its ability to enslave people. Jesus says: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”² In contrasting “money” with “God,” our Lord indicates that surrender to God’s authority over our life can free us from the power of money over us. Borrowing not only brings one into the power of another human being, “the lender,” but it enslaves one’s soul. Paul’s advice to Timothy is quite pertinent here: “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life...”³ The Old Testament Law forbade the Israelites to charge interest to their kinsmen. “If you lend money to one of my

1. Deut. 20:5

2. Matt. 6:24

3. I Tim. 6:6-12

people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.”¹ And: “Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest.”²

V.8 can be seen in connection with the previous verse in that some people use the blessings God has given to them as tools of wickedness to bind their fellowmen. Being rich is in itself no curse or blessing. It is how we are rich (or poor) that determines whether we are blessed or cursed. Using the possessions God has given us on loan, to enslave and manipulate other people, means sowing wickedness and harvesting trouble. As the rich man in Jesus’ parable experienced, it will be done to us as we did to others.³ Derek Kinder, in *Proverbs*, gives this verse the heading: “The furrows of unrighteousness.” He comments: “This is chiefly encouragement to the oppressed ... Harvest time will answer all questions.”

V.9 shows the other side of the coin we saw in the two previous verses. The Hebrew is more picturesque than the English text can convey: “He that has a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he gives of his bread to the poor.” The Hebrew word, rendered here “bountiful” is *towb*, which has a variety of meaning, all pointing to something good. The first and foremost conclusion we may draw from the way generosity is presented to us in this verse is that it is rooted in the way we look at life. Generosity has nothing to do with the size of our possessions. The verse actually suggests that the bread this person gives away is part of what he eats himself. He does not share from his abundance. No better illustration of this principle is found than in Paul’s testimony about the Christians in Macedonia. In his *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, the Apostle writes: “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.”⁴ God’s grace was demonstrated in those Christians in that “their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” For Christians, the grace of generosity is based upon the example of Jesus Christ, about which Paul said: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”⁵ It is our trust in God’s provision for our needs that will allow us to share with others what we have and to pay our bills in time. A pastor I heard years ago made a statement I will never forget: “A Christian can always afford to pay.”

10 Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife; quarrels and insults are ended.

11 He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend.

12 The eyes of the LORD keep watch over knowledge, but he frustrates the words of the unfaithful.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes about v.10: “Disagreement and bad blood sometimes arise not from the facts of a disagreement but from a person with a wrong attitude, who makes mischief. That is to say, what an institutions sometimes needs is not reforms, but the expulsion of a member; see Matthew 18:17.” The quoted reference reads: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

It seems, however, that more is involved than a matter of church discipline. Strife and quarrel are never a one-man deal. It always takes two to start a fight. Although it remains true that discipline must be enforced and people sometimes must be expelled, problems never end without getting to the root, which is the presence of the prince of evil. To remove Satan’s tools and allow the devil to stay will not solve any

1. Ex. 22:25

2. Deut. 23:19

3. See Luke 17:18-26.

4. II Cor. 8:1-5

5. II Cor. 8:9

problem. The body of Christ will only function well if it is ruled by the Spirit of love, the Holy Spirit. “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”¹

Several Bible scholars refer to the example of Ishmael’s expulsion from Abraham’s family. We read: “But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, ‘Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.’”² The Apostle Paul quotes this verse in the context of a Christian’s liberty in Christ. He writes: “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? ‘Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.’ Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.”³

The person in v.11 is the liberated Christian whose heart has been made pure by the application of the blood of Christ. *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* sees in him the perfect gentleman! We read: “The qualification of an accomplished, a complete gentleman, that is fit to be employed in public business. He must be an honest man, a man that loves pureness of heart and hates all impurity, not only pure from all fleshly lusts, but from all deceit and dissimulation, from all selfishness and sinister designs, that takes care to approve himself a man of sincerity, is just and fair from principle, and delights in nothing more than in keeping his own conscience clean and void of offence. He must also be able to speak with a good grace, not to daub and flatter, but to deliver his sentiments decently and ingeniously, in language clean and smooth as his spirit.”

This verse is presented to us as part of the text written by King Solomon. We may, therefore, assume that the qualifications of having a pure heart and using gracious speech were elements Solomon looked for in choosing his friends. Since the unregenerate human heart is impure, the verse implies that something must have happened to that kind of heart to make it pure. Jesus said in *The Sermon on the Mount*: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”⁴ He also said: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”⁵ We understand that, if purity of heart were a condition for seeing God, no human being would ever qualify. In the *Beatitudes* that open *The Sermon on the Mount*, being merciful, pure in heart and being a peacemaker are not conditions for fellowship with God, but fruits of that fellowship grown in us by the Holy Spirit. The author of *Hebrews* explains to us that sincerity of heart is the result of being sprinkled by the blood of Christ. We read: “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”⁶

V.11 reads in Hebrew: “He that loves purity of heart for the grace of his lips the king shall be his friend.” Purity of heart and grace in speech go together. The Hebrew word *chen*, graciousness, is the equivalent of the Greek word *charis*. The Apostle Paul confirms the need for grace in speech. To the Colossians he wrote: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”⁷

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1. Ps. 133:1,3^b
 2. Gen. 21:9,10
 3. Gal. 4:28-31
 4. Matt. 5:8
 5. Matt. 15:19
 6. Heb. 10:22
 7. Col. 4:6

The Hebrew of v.12 reads literally: “The eyes of the Lord preserve knowledge and he overthrows the words of the transgressor.” The Hebrew word for “knowledge” is *da`ath*. Earlier in our study we saw how important *da`ath* is. We wrote: “ ‘Knowledge,’ *da`ath* in Hebrew, is more than information stored in the head. It is the awareness that demonstrates itself in cunning. We find it in the theme of *The Book of Proverbs* in the opening verses that state that Solomon’s purpose in writing was ‘for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young...’¹ We could call it one of the keywords of the book since it occurs at least 39 times in it. The word is found for the first time in Scripture in the mention of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” The interesting feature in this verse is that “words” is used as a parallel to “knowledge.” Seen in connection with the previous verse we conclude that as there is a connection between purity and speech, and in this verse there is a correlation between knowledge and speech, purity and knowledge are related also. True knowledge does not grow on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil but on the tree of life. The fact that “the eyes of the Lord preserve knowledge” indicates that God pays special attention to the way our knowledge of Him expresses itself in our daily life. Knowledge of God is eternal life, as Jesus says: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”² The second clause in this proverb implies that those who do not have eternal life, who do not know God, do not know what they are talking about. Their “knowledge” does not amount to anything that holds up to reality.

13 The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!" or, "I will be murdered in the streets!"

We have met the sluggard before. He is the *`atsel*, the slothful who pops up from time to time in *The Book of Proverbs* presenting excuses to justify its lack of activity. We mentioned earlier that the word *`atsel* is found in Scripture only in *The Book of Proverbs*, where it occurs 14 times. We understand that v.13 only makes sense if there is no lion outside and if the city in which the sluggard lives is a safe place and not a gang riddled place. Some people living in some of our modern metropolises may be right in fearing to go out without being a sluggard.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on v.13: “The absurd nature of the sluggard’s excuse is hardly understood by the casual reader. The supposed lion is without, in the open country, and yet he professes to be in danger in the midst of the town ... Others consider that the sluggard makes two excuses for his inactivity. If work calls him abroad, he may meet the lion which report says is prowling in the neighborhood; if he has to go into the streets, he may be attacked and murdered by ruffians for motives of plunder or revenge. ‘Sluggards are prophets,’ says the Hebrew proverb.” We do appreciate the sharp irony in that proverb!

14 The mouth of an adulteress is a deep pit; he who is under the LORD’s wrath will fall into it.

15 Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.

16 He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and he who gives gifts to the rich — both come to poverty.

V.14 deals with more than sexual temptation; it depicts the consequences of departing from fellowship with God. It is God’s wrath over sin, this constant revulsion God feels against anything that falls short of His glory, that removes the restraint from human life. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for

1. Prov. 1:4

2. John 17:3

the degrading of their bodies with one another.”¹ No one is predestined to fall into sin. We give in to the whisperings of the adulteress and of our deprived nature because we choose to. On the other hand, if we put ourselves under the protection of the Holy Spirit and experience intimacy with God, there will be no fatal temptations in our life. Again in Paul’s words: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”²

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “It may be that theology rather than morals is signified here — rather false doctrines than evil practice. In this case the mention of the strange or foreign woman is very appropriate, seeing that perversions of belief and worship were always introduced into Israel from external sources.”

Discipline of a child in v.15, administered in the form of corporal punishment, is a theme that runs through the whole *Book of Proverbs*.³ In the Hebrew, the word “bound” is a strong expression. The Hebrew *qashar* conveys the idea of being knit together. In the context of the preceding and following verse, however, the purpose seems to be to trace the origin of human sinful nature. We bring our tendency to sin with us as we enter this world. It is part of our human heritage. David confessed: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”⁴ The point is not so much that children must be spanked but that, if they are allowed to grow up unchecked, they will never learn to stand up to temptation. That principle makes this verse fit into the previous one. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, *The Septuagint* approaches this verse from the angle of the indulgent parent. In their Greek translation, the text reads: “Folly is attached to the heart of the young, but the rod and discipline are far from him.”

V.16 jumps ahead from the undisciplined child to the adult. The first clause of the verse looks down from the top, the second clause looks up from the bottom. If selfishness is left unchecked in youth it will demonstrate itself in society in the way one climbs to the top over the bodies of his opponents. This does not mean that people cannot be stopped in their track and that the Gospel cannot change the life of an adult. This verse emphasizes how human nature will end up if there is no guidance and restraint. There is in the background of this verse the hidden human need for recognition. This is in itself not a sinful trait. The tragedy consists in the belief that riches will give us self worth. We will be recognized if we become rich, but only by those whose recognition does not count. Jesus asked His contemporaries in amazement: “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”⁵

It is obvious, however, that the principle of bribing the rich and oppressing the poor seems to work well in the world in which we live. It is only when we let the light of eternity shine upon human behavior, we see how poor are the rich that are not rich in God.

C. Proverbs Concerning Various Situations 22:17—24:34

1. Chapter 22:17-29

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1. Rom. 1:21-24
 2. I Cor. 10:13
 3. See Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 23:13,14; 29:15,17.
 4. Ps. 51:5
 5. John 5:44

This section begins the first appendix to the proverbs of Solomon. Although “the wise” in v.17 stands in the plural, in v.19 the teacher is a single person who addresses one individual. Some Bible scholars believe that Solomon is still the author of this part and that the change is only a change of style, a return to the didactic mode of the early section of the book. “The sayings of the wise” would then be merely a three-verse introduction to what is to follow, the rest being the teaching of Solomon himself. Others believe that the teacher here is not King Solomon, but the same person who composed the proverbs in the first ten chapters of the book.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary sees in these chapters only a change of style, not of author. *The Commentary* states: “Solomon here changes his style and manner of speaking. Hitherto, for the most part, since the beginning of ch. 10, he had laid down doctrinal truths, and but now and then dropped a word of exhortation, leaving us to make the application as we went along; but here, to the end of ch. 24, he directs his speech to his son, his pupil, his reader, his hearer, speaking as to a particular person. Hitherto, for the most part, his sense was comprised in one verse, but here usually it is drawn out further. See how Wisdom tries a variety of methods with us, lest we should be cloyed with any one. To awaken attention and to assist our application the method of direct address is here adopted. Ministers must not think it enough to preach before their hearers, but must preach to them, nor enough to preach to them all in general, but should address themselves to particular persons, as here: Do thou do so and so.”

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, gives the following clarifying introduction to this section: “A series of proverbs demands much of the reader, if it is not to remain for him a string of platitudes. The present call to attention is salutary not only in its immediate context but beyond it, to enable the disciple to review his response to all Scripture. Does he read with alert concentration (17)? How much is retained and ready for passing on (18)? Does he receive it in the spirit in which it is given—to deepen his trust (19), guide his decisions (20) and strengthen his grasp of truth (21)? Does he see himself as the virtual envoy (*cf. send thee, 21*) of those whose knowledge of the truth depends on him?”

Bible scholars have also found in this section parallels with some ancient Egyptian wisdom literature. It would go well beyond the scope of this study to do any research in this direction as well as in the controversy about the authorship.

17 Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach,

18 for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips.

19 So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you.

20 Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge,

21 teaching you true and reliable words, so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you?

The Hebrew of v.17 reads literally: “Bow down your ear and hear the words of the wise, and your heart apply unto my knowledge.” It seems that “bow down” means more than “pay attention” as *The New International Version* interprets it. The expression seems to express in its downward movement an act of humility and willingness to listen. The fact that the pupil is a young person does not mean that he realizes his need to learn. It takes humility to learn. This applies to learning in general but particularly to that kind of teaching that leads to salvation. Whether the teacher is Solomon or some of his wise advisers, their words do not have the creative power of the Word of Christ. Only Jesus Christ could say: “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.”¹ And the Apostle Paul says: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”² And he

1. Matt. 12:42

2. Rom. 10:17

admonishes us: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”¹

The Living Bible combines the three introductory verses into one line: “Listen to this wise advice; follow it closely, for it will do you good, and you can pass it on to others: Trust in the Lord.” *The New Living Translation* brings out the emphatic personal tone of these verses, making the application inescapable: “Listen to the words of the wise; apply your heart to my instruction. For it is good to keep these sayings deep within yourself, always ready on your lips. I am teaching you today — yes, you — so you will trust in the LORD. I have written thirty sayings for you, filled with advice and knowledge. In this way, you may know the truth and bring an accurate report to those who sent you.”

If we allow the Word of God to live richly in us we will be the happiest and most satisfied of all people. The Bible has a lot to say about the way God’s Word in our heart brings the utmost satisfaction. The Psalmist exclaims: “The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”² And: “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”³ The Word of God will prove to be the ultimate nourishment for us, genuine soul food. Jesus testified: “I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food ... is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”⁴

The Word of God must be in our heart, not merely in our head. The Hebrew does not use the word “heart” in this context, but merely “within you.” The idea is clear, however, that the Word of God ought to be the central part of our daily experience, not merely a matter of intellectual knowledge. Only if we love God with all of our heart, mind and will, will the Word of God be the source of joy and satisfaction to us. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, *The Septuagint* renders v.18: “And if you admit them to your heart, they shall likewise gladden your lips.” Jesus says: “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.”⁵ No one who has the Word of God inside will be able to keep quiet about it.

The mention of “thirty” in v.20 catches our attention. The Hebrew word *shaliysh* literally means “a triple,” or “a triangle.” Some Bible scholars believe it refers to a three-stringed lute. As such we find it used in the verse: “When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and *lutes*.”⁶ It is sometimes used to indicate a military rank as “a general of the third rank.” In that sense we find it in the verse: “These are the names of David’s mighty men: Josheb-Basshebeth, a Tahkemonite, was *chief of the Three*; he raised his spear against eight hundred men, whom he killed in one encounter.”⁷ *The New International Version* adds a footnote with the alternate reading: “Or not formerly written; or not written excellent.” According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, the *Septuagint* translates the text: “And do your record them to yourself triply for counsel and knowledge upon the table of your heart.” The best interpretation seems, in fact, to be to disregard the number thirty and consider it to be an idiomatic expression of excellence.

The words in v.21 “so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you” are most intriguing. A two-fold interpretation seems to present itself. First of all, hiding God’s Word in our hearts will make us

1. Col. 3:16
2. Ps. 19:9^b-11
3. Ps. 119:103
4. John 4:32,34
5. Matt. 12:34
6. I Sam. 18:6
7. II Sam. 23:8

responsible people who will be able to account for the work God has sent us to do. Another explanation would be that people around us would see that we are different from other people and they will inquire to know what makes us special. The Apostle Paul uses the thought of the first application in his First Epistle to the Corinthians: “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”¹ The Apostle Peter uses it in the second sense: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”² This fulfills Zechariah’s prophecy: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’”³

**22 Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court,
23 for the LORD will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them.
24 Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered,
25 or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.
26 Do not be a man who strikes hands in pledge or puts up security for debts;
27 if you lack the means to pay, your very bed will be snatched from under you.
28 Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your forefathers.
29 Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.**

These eight verses open the actual section of proverbs. They consist of a series of four “don’ts” and one “do.” The whole division culminates the last advice that extols excellence. The four “don’ts” issue a warning against taking shortcuts. The only way to get to the top is by excelling in what one does.

The first application that forces itself upon us is the importance of being recognized as somebody in human society, not because of secondary factors but because of quality of character and performance. Obscurity is mentioned as a condition to be left behind. The teacher in these verses advises his pupil to make a name for himself by being good, very good, at what he does. The Hebrew word rendered “skilled” is *mahiyir*, which means “quick,” or “skilful.” *The King James Version* sometimes renders it “diligent.”

We could elaborate the theme and look at the various spheres in which a human being can excel but since the opportunities are endless that would not lead us into the important application. Solomon, in *Ecclesiastes* puts the principle in the framework of the meaninglessness of life, which is the general theme of his book. We read: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.”⁴ If death were the end of life excellence in work during our earthly existence would in fact be without lasting value. And it is eternal worth that counts. In Jesus’ *Parable of the Talents*⁵ the good servant was rewarded by sharing his master’s happiness. Standing before kings or presidents in this world may not be transferable into eternity. But doing with all our might what God has assigned us to do, however menial the task may seem, will make us stand before the King of kings. No one defines the principle so well as the Apostle Paul, who wrote: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will

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1. I Cor. 4:1,2
 2. I Peter 3:15
 3. Zech. 8:23
 4. Eccl. 9:10
 5. See Matt. 25:14-30.

receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”¹ And: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”² And: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”³

Keeping this in mind, we must take a look at the “shortcuts” that must be avoided. The Hebrew in v.22 reads literally: “Rob not the poor because he is poor: neither oppress the afflicted in the gate.” *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* observes: “If their inability, by reason of their poverty, to right themselves, embolden us to rob them, it is so much the worse; this is robbing the poor because he is poor; this is not only a base and cowardly thing, to take advantage against a man because he is helpless, but it is unnatural, and proves men worse than beasts.”

Exploitation of our fellowmen, as in v.22, can always be traced to a lack of recognition of God’s image in the other person. To take advantage of someone else’s weakness is a sign of shortsightedness. Jesus explained this in a parable like fashion in the story of the sheep and the goats: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”⁴ The “obscure man” we meet in our daily life, the one who comes to us hungry and thirsty and sick, the naked stranger we visit in prison may turn out to be the King!

V.23 states “the LORD will take up their case.” We know now that He did this in totally identifying Himself with us. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”⁵

V.24 emphasizes the importance of self-control. Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life.⁶ The Hebrew text reads literally: “Make no friendship with an angry man and with a furious man lest you learn his ways and get a snare to your soul.”

Anger in itself is not the problem. In His life on earth as a human being, Jesus demonstrated anger. In connection with the healing of a man’s hand we read: “Then Jesus asked [the Pharisees] ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ But they remained silent. He looked around at them *in anger* and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.”⁷ The Apostle Paul, obviously, allowed for controlled anger when he wrote to the Ephesians: “ ‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”⁸ There is enough in life, ever since Satan came to meddle

1. Col. 3:23,24

2. Col. 3:17

3. I Cor. 10:31

4. Matt. 25:34-40

5. John 1:14

6. See Gal. 5:25.

7. Mark 3:4,5

8. Eph. 4:26,27

with God's perfect creation, to be angry about. But we must be careful not to play into the enemy's hand when we become irritated.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary comments: "It is the law of friendship that we accommodate ourselves to our friends and be ready to serve them, and therefore we ought to be wise and wary in the choice of a friend, that we come not under the sacred tie to any one whom it would be our folly to accommodate ourselves to. Though we must be civil to all, yet we must be careful whom we lay in our bosoms and contract a familiarity with. And, among others, a man who is easily provoked, touchy, and apt to resent affronts, who, when he is in a passion, cares not what he says or does, but grows outrageous, such a one is not fit to be made a friend or companion, for he will be ever and anon angry with us and that will be our trouble, and he will expect that we should, like him, be angry with others, and that will be our sin. Good cause given for this caution: Lest thou learn his way. Those we go with we are apt to grow like. Our corrupt hearts have so much tinder in them that it is dangerous conversing with those that throw about the sparks of their passion. We shall thereby get a snare to our souls, for a disposition to anger is a great snare to any man, and an occasion of much sin. He does not say, 'Lest thou have ill language given thee or get a broken head,' but, which is must worse, 'Lest thou imitate him, to humor him, and so contract an ill habit.'"

The main problem with anger is that it is often directed at the wrong object. Most angry people are angry with themselves but they project their irritation upon someone else. That is often the wrong lesson we learn from the angry man we befriend. When we are angry we do well to ask ourselves the question whether our object is the right one.

The person in vv.26 and 27 is almost the opposite of the one in the previous two verses. This is Mr. Gullible who sticks his neck out where he should not. There is a great difference between helping people in need and allowing ourselves to get involved in someone else's shrewd shenanigans. It is not wrong to help a person in need but we must not extend ourselves beyond our ability to help. Willingness to help ought to be governed by capability. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have."¹ But giving money is not the topic here. It is the foolishness of pledging for someone who is deliberately planning to go into debt. *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* correctly observes: "We must not ruin our own estates and families. Every man ought to be just to himself and to his wife and children; those are not so who live above what they have, who by the mismanagement of their own affairs, or by encumbering themselves with debts of others, waste what they have and bring themselves to poverty. We may take joyfully the spoiling of our goods if it be for the testimony of a good conscience; but, if be for our own rashness and folly, we cannot but take it heavily."

V.28 deals with more than stealing someone else's acreage. This was written for people who lived in the Promised Land in which God had allotted well-defined plots to each of the tribes of Israel. Laws governing the inheritance of those possessions were very strict and precise. The land belonged to God and He gave it to the tribes of Israel to use. We read in Leviticus: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants."² The law specifically forbade moving markers in a field belonging to the neighbor. We read: "Do not move your neighbor's boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess."³ This was implicitly covered by the last of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."⁴ We find an illustration of this kind of greed, which eventually led to murder in the story of Naboth's vineyard, which King Ahab confiscated. We read: "Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was

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1. II Cor. 8:12
 2. Lev. 25:23
 3. Deut. 19:14
 4. Ex. 20:17

in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, 'Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.' But Naboth replied, 'The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.'¹ David testified: "LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance."²

There is an indirect link between v.28 and the oppression of the poor mentioned in vv.22 and 23. In other instances in which boundary stones are mentioned in *The Book of Proverbs* it concerns widows and orphans. We read: "The LORD tears down the proud man's house but he keeps the widow's boundaries intact."³ And: "Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you."⁴ Evidently, this kind of social injustice was practiced in Israel.

2. Chapter 23:1-35

1 When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you,

2 and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony.

3 Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive.

4 Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.

5 Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.

6 Do not eat the food of a stingy man, do not crave his delicacies;

7 for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with you.

8 You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments.

Although eating and drinking is frequently mentioned in this chapter, the main theme seems to be a continuation of the last verse of the previous chapter: how to work one's way up in life. The goal in life is "to serve the king." Most of the verses contain a warning against shortcuts; they show how it ought not to be done. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, heads this section "Discomforts of the social heights."

In establishing social contacts it is important to realize that there are many pitfalls that must be avoided. As the saying goes: "Who finds me bread and cheese, it's to his tune I dance." We may observe that there is only a small step from being a social drinker to becoming an alcoholic. There is in the sharing of food more than nourishment for the body; it affects the soul also. C. S. Lewis, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, illustrates this well in the story of Edmund, who eats the witch's Turkish Delight and thus falls under her evil spell. In most cases, however, the temptations are less obvious. "Gluttony" in these verses stands more for the desire to climb the social ladder, regardless of the way it is done than for a lack of control of appetite. There is also a strong suggestion in these verses that "the ruler" wants to feed his guest more than food.

The scene is described in vivid detail. The social climber has succeeded in receiving an invitation to the ruler's table. Both host and guest are bent on influencing one another for the purpose for which they have come together. A footnote in *The New International Version* states that "what is before you" can also be read "who is before you." Sin entered this world through the act of eating. If Adam and Eve had paid attention to who offered them the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they might have been able to avoid disaster. Even if the devil offers us offers us "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" as he did to

1. See I Kings 21:1-16

2. Ps. 16:5,6

3. Prov. 15:25

4. Prov. 23:10,11

our Lord Jesus Christ,¹ we must not yield to that temptation. David, on the other hand, depicts fellowship with God, which gives victory over the enemy, in terms of sitting at the Lord's table. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."²

The warning against gluttony emphasizes the need for self-control. One who cannot stop eating will not be able to exercise restraint in the use of power either, and "power" is what this meal is all about. The author of Proverbs suggests that in cases where we find ourselves unable to control ourselves, it is better to use the knife on our throat than on the meat that is served to us. If this sounds extreme to us, we must remember Jesus' words about how to deal with temptation: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."³

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary also believes that these verses do not merely concern good table manners as some Bible scholars suggest. We read: "Rather, it concerns one's relation to royalty. It enjoins fear and caution before a king. The point is that the king's table is not for mere surfeiting, but for conference."

V.4 preaches the same restraint as v.2. One of the greatest deceptions of life is the lure of riches. Most people believe that to be rich means to be secure. Money is believed to be power, safety, protection and happiness. Yet, nothing is so elusive as material possessions. In *The Parable of the Sower*, Jesus speaks about "the deceitfulness of wealth" that chokes the Word of God in the human heart.⁴ He warns that "moth and rust" can destroy our treasures and that thieves can break in and steal them.⁵ The speaker in these verses in Proverbs tells us that money tends to sprout wings and fly away. When we are realistic, we must conclude that nothing is more temporal than earthly possessions. The Apostle Paul wrote this powerful testimony to Timothy: "We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."⁶ And Jesus brings us back to reality with the statement: "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."⁷ Our worth does not rest upon what we have but on what we are as bearers of God's image.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, mentions that the illusiveness of riches is also found in extra-biblical literature, using the same images as *The Book of Proverbs* here. From *Amenemope*, he quotes: "They have made themselves wings like geese and are flown away to heaven." And from *Nippur*: "Possessions are sparrows in flight which can find no place to alight."

Vv. 6-8 brings us back to someone else's table, this time not to a royal banquet but to the miser's. The Hebrew text is a little more complicated than *The New International Version's* translation would make us suspect. It reads literally: "Eat not the bread of him who has an evil eye, neither desire his dainty meats. For as he thinks in his heart so he is: Eat and drink he says to you; but his heart is not with you." The "evil eye" in v.6 contrasts with the "bountiful eye" in the previous chapter.⁸ The table is here approached from a

1. See Matt. 4:8.
2. Ps. 23:5
3. Matt. 5:29,30
4. See Matt. 13:22.
5. See Matt. 6:19.
6. I Tim. 6:7-13
7. Luke 12:15

different angle. The Scrooge who invites his guest in this case does not really want to feed him. We are not told why the invitation is issued, but it is obviously not for reasons of kindness and hospitality. There are ulterior motives in the host's heart that move him to sacrifice his expensive food for a purpose that benefits him but not his guest. The guest is simply being used. The thought expressed here in a vivid and colorful way is similar to the warning against becoming the security for someone's debts.¹

The Pulpit Commentary states: "The Septuagint, pointing differently, translates, 'For as if one should swallow a hair, so he eats and drinks.' The Greek translators take the gnome to apply to one who invites an envious man to his table, and finds him eating his food as if it disgusted him. They go on, 'Bring him not in to thee, nor eat thy morsel with him; for (ver. 8) he will vomit it up, and outrage thy fair words.' In agreement with the gnome above, we find in the Talmud, 'My son, eat not the bread of the covetous, nor sit thou at his table. The bread of the covetous is only pain and anguish; the bread of the generous man is a source of health and joy.'"²

The Talmud's observation takes these verses out of its literal context and widens the application by suggesting that we must be careful in all our associations with others. Any kind of dealing with a generous person will be a cause of joy and blessing; doing business with a Scrooge will give us a sour stomach.

The unwritten lesson in these verses shows us what human fellowship ought to be like. In our human relations we must demonstrate love for our neighbor without calculating how much it will cost us. The Samaritan who rescued the man who had fallen victim to a robbery "took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"²

9 Do not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words.

The Hebrew text reads literally: "Do not speak in the ears of a fool" suggesting more whispering than simply addressing someone. The text does not clarify what is said in the fool's ear apart from that the words are words of wisdom. They do not necessarily constitute a rebuke as in an earlier proverb: "Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you."³ This proverb corresponds to Jesus' admonition: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."⁴ It is true that fools must be warned, but we are admonished to be wise in the way we do it. There is a fine line between loving insistence that leads to salvation and pressure that alienates. Our heart goes out to the old prophet Samuel, but "the LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel?'"⁵ We cannot improve upon the Lord's compassion.

***10 Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless,
11 for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you.***

As we saw earlier in connection with a previous proverb,⁶ the primary reference here is to the division of the Promised Land. In this case the orphans are singled out as victims who have no natural protection against oppression. David calls God the Father of the orphans. We read: "A father to the

8. See Prov. 22:9.

1. See Prov. 22:26.

2. See Luke 10:30-36.

3. Prov. 9:8

4. Matt. 7:6

5. I Sam. 16:1

6. See Prov. 22:23.

fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.”¹ And James emphasizes that sanctification demonstrates itself first and foremost in concern for orphans and widows. We read: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”²

12 Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge.
13 Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die.
14 Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.
15 My son, if your heart is wise, then my heart will be glad;
16 my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak what is right.
17 Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD.
18 There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.
19 Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path.
20 Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat,
21 for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
22 Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.
23 Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline and understanding.
24 The father of a righteous man has great joy; he who has a wise son delights in him.
25 May your father and mother be glad; may she who gave you birth rejoice!
26 My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways,
27 for a prostitute is a deep pit and a wayward wife is a narrow well.
28 Like a bandit she lies in wait, and multiplies the unfaithful among men.
29 Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises?
Who has bloodshot eyes?
30 Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.
31 Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly!
32 In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper.
33 Your eyes will see strange sights and your mind imagine confusing things.
34 You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging.
35 "They hit me," you will say, "but I'm not hurt! They beat me, but I don't feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?"

This is the largest section with a common theme in *The Book of Proverbs*. The fatherly advice is not interrupted by any sidelines. This father-son talk reflects the relationship we ought to have with our heavenly Father and it is modeled upon it. The only interruption, which does not cut the line of thought, is the advice given to the father regarding disciplinary action.

The key word in Hebrew is the word *leb* which is used eight times in these verses.³ V.26, “My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways” are the very words God speaks to each of us. That takes the father’s warning against prostitution out of the realm of the sins of the flesh and places it in the context of our relationship with God.

The Hebrew word *muwcar*, rendered “instruction” in v.12 is the same word rendered “discipline” in v.13. The implication is that if we do not learn to discipline ourselves, someone else, a higher authority, will have to do it for us. For without restraint in life we will loose our way, and we will be lost both in soul and body. So, v.12 does not tell us primarily that we must listen to fatherly advice but that we must have the

1. Ps. 68:5,6
2. James 1:27
3. The Hebrew in v.34 reads “in the heart of the sea.”

wisdom to keep ourselves under control. We must all learn the art of controlling ourselves and consequently we must all learn to obey the authority that is above us. That authority is ultimately God, but it will come to us initially in the form of parental control. This is not related to our sinful nature, as is evident from the fact that Jesus had to learn to obey. We read about the young Jesus and His parents: “Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.”¹ And the author of Hebrews states about Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane: “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”²

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes about this section: “The brisk 13b can be taken in two ways, and 14 underlines the second of them: the child will not only survive it, he will survive *because* of it ... But if a parent’s firmness is vital, so is the child’s own choice (15,16); so, too, is the underlying warmth of affection discernible in 15b, 16a. (The note of personal appeal is characteristic of this whole section, and gives it a close affinity to chapters 1-9).”

The word “apply” in v.12 indicates that we must act in order to reap the benefits of wisdom. As the saying goes, “You can lead a horse to the water, but you cannot force it to drink.” Application of God’s wisdom too depends on a personal choice. God’s grace is never forced upon us. We are saved by grace, but it is in response to divine invitation. Jesus says: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”³ And: “On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.’”⁴

As was mentioned above, vv.13 and 14 are addressed to the father, not to the son. The topic is obviously physical punishment. The Bible not only allows for spanking, it prescribes it. The text even suggests that it may be severe, not merely a slap on the wrist. The Hebrew of v.14 reads literally: “You shall beat him with the rod and shall deliver his soul from hell.” It needs no comment, though, that these verses give no license to administer cruel and unusual punishment.

The verses must be seen against the background of the instructions in the law regarding “a stubborn and rebellious son.” We read: “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.”⁵ The fact that such punishment of wayward children is no longer an option in modern society does not mean that corporal punishment would no longer have validity either, although some people seem to think so. Jewish parents in Old Testament times must have taken their responsibility of training their children more seriously than most parents do in our day.

We cannot leave these verses without referring to the observation of the author of Hebrews. He places human parental discipline in the context of God’s discipline. God uses the rod in order to give us victory over sin and make us share in His holiness. We read: “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true

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1. Luke 2:51
 2. Heb. 5:7,8
 3. Matt. 11:28
 4. John 7:37
 5. Deut. 21:18-21

sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”¹

V.15 indicates that a child-parent relationship is a matter of the heart. This does not mean that the only reason a child ought to behave is to please his parents. Sons or daughters can only have a wise heart if their relationship with God is genuine and strong. This means that bad human relationships can be traced to a broken relationship with God. This may not always be the child’s fault. It always takes two to have a good relationship, but only one to have a broken one.

With v.17 begins the practical application of the wisdom mentioned above. The first is a warning against comparing oneself with the Jones.

The Hebrew word, translated “envy” is *qana*, which beside meaning “envy” can also be rendered “zealous.” As such we find it in the verse: “Now the Gibeonites were not a part of Israel but were survivors of the Amorites; the Israelites had sworn to [spare] them, but Saul *in his zeal* for Israel and Judah had tried to annihilate them.”² The implication is that we must not spend our zeal or energy in comparing ourselves with other people but with God and adjust our lives to Him instead of to others. *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that the verb is used in two senses. We read: “In the first clause it signifies to be envious of a person: in the second, to be zealous for a thing, both senses combining in the thought of being moved with eager desire.”

The future, “the end” in the Hebrew text, refers to eternity when God will settle all accounts and judge everybody’s life. If we keep in mind that our acts will be judged in eternity, we must try to see our deeds in that light. C. S. Lewis used the illustration of a lady who buys a piece of material in a store. She will take it to the window to see what the color looks like in the sunlight. That is the way we ought to evaluate ourselves.

The Hebrew word for “hope” is *tiqvah*, which literally means “a cord,” as in the verse: “The men said to [Rahab], ‘This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet *cord* in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house.’ ”³ “Hope” is what ties us to God’s eternity.

The warning in vv.19-21 is elaborately illustrated in the last section of this chapter, vv.29-35. Keeping our heart on the right track will demonstrate itself in moderation. The warning is not against drinking a glass of wine or eating a tasty meal, but against excess.

Speaking about temperance, C. S. Lewis writes: “Temperance is, unfortunately, one of those words that has changed its meaning. It now usually means teetotalism. But in the days when the second Cardinal virtue was christened ‘Temperance’, it meant nothing of the sort. Temperance referred not specially to drink, but to all pleasures; and it meant not abstaining, but going the right length and no further. It is a mistake to think that Christians ought all to be teetotalers; Mohammedanism, not Christianity, is the teetotal religion. Of course it may be the duty of a particular Christian, or of any Christian, at a particular time, to abstain from strong drink, either because he is the sort of man who cannot drink at all without drinking too much, or because he wants to give the money to the poor, or because he is with people who are inclined to drunkenness and must not encourage them by drinking himself. But the whole point is that he is abstaining, for a good reason, from something which he does not condemn and which he likes to see other people enjoying. One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting everyone else to give it up. That is not the Christian way. An individual Christian may see fit to give

1. Heb. 12:4-11
2. II Sam. 21:2
3. Josh. 2:17,18

up all sorts of things for special reason—marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning. One great piece of mischief has been done by the modern restriction of the word Temperance to the question of drink. It helps people to forget that you can be just as intemperate about lots of other things. A man who makes his golf or his motor bicycle the center of his life, or a woman who devotes all her thoughts to clothes or bridge or her dog, is being just as ‘intemperate’ as someone who gets drunk every evening. Or course, it does not show on the outside so easily: bridge-mania or golf-mania do not make you fall down in the middle of the road. But God is not deceived by externals.”

V.22 seems to give a reason why the son ought to listen to his father: because he gave him life! If this is true in the physical sense, it is even truer spiritually. We have a moral obligation to our Creator because of the simple fact that He created us. This verse says more than that, in conception, life comes from the father; it also establishes the basis for a deeper human relationship. It is upon this fact that the fifth commandment is based: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”¹ It must be observed that “living in the land” stands for more than inhabiting the country of Canaan; it means entering into God’s rest.

When the father advises his son to “buy the truth and do not sell it” he tells him that there are certain values in life that surpass any material wealth and that must be acquired for life on earth to have meaning. Those values are eternal and they are linked to the knowledge of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”² The Apostle John expresses the same joy the father and mother convey here about their son who understands what life is all about. We read: “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.”³ Solomon stated the same truth earlier: “How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver!”⁴ It is important to be out to get “number one” in life, as long as we understand what it is.

It takes spiritually mature parents to rejoice in the spirituality of their children. Some children who have surrendered their life to the Lord find rejection on the parental side. In that case David’s comment may be helpful: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.”⁵

Vv.26-28 far surpass in content a warning against sexual immorality or prostitution. Although sexual temptation may seem to be a young man’s major difficulty in life, it is not the ultimate or worst obstacle to fulfillment. The Bible calls unfaithfulness toward God “prostitution.” The prophet Hosea says: “They have deserted the LORD to give themselves to prostitution, to old wine and new, which take away the understanding of my people. They consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood. A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God.”⁶

As children, we are not required either to give our heart, that is the control of our life, our thoughts and emotions, to our parents, but we do well to totally surrender to God. It is God who says in these verses: “Give Me your heart and your love and remain faithful to Me.”

The last section of this chapter, vv.29-35, contains a vivid description of the miserable condition of an alcoholic. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “The words in the original are interjections, probably expressing distress. The sharp touch of the satirist reproduces the actual inarticulate utterances of drunkenness.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states about these verses: “An unforgettable study of the drunkard, as he is seen (29)

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1. Ex. 20:12
 2. John 17:3
 3. II John v.4
 4. Prov. 16:16
 5. Ps. 27:10
 6. Hos. 4:10-12

and as he sees (33-35). His imagination is as uncontrollable as his legs (34); and if there is pathos in his first fascination (31), there is far more in his final bravado (35).”

Solomon earlier issued a warning against this addiction and stated that it manifests a lack of wisdom. “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.”¹ The Apostle Paul wrote the same truth to the Christians in Ephesus: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”² The implication is that having the wisdom of the Holy Spirit will guard us against intoxication.

Eugene H. Peterson’s rendering in *Proverbs* is perhaps even more vivid than any traditional translations: “Who are the people who are always crying the blues? Who do you know who reeks of self-pity? Who keeps getting beat up for no reason at all? Whose eyes are bleary and bloodshot? It’s those who spend the night with a bottle, for whom drinking is serious business. Don’t judge wine by its label, or its bouquet, or its full-bodied flavor. Judge it rather by the hangover it leaves you with— the splitting headache, the queasy stomach. Do you really prefer seeing double, with your speech all slurred, reeling and seasick, drunk as a sailor? ‘They hit me,’ you’ll say, ‘but it didn’t hurt; they beat on me, but I didn’t feel a thing. When I’m sober enough to manage it, bring me another drink!’ ”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary asserts: “When the wine is in, the wit is out and the passions are up.” And *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* pointedly remarks: “SIN makes a man contemptible in life, miserable in death, and wretched to all eternity. Is it not strange, then, that men should LOVE it?”

Interestingly, in the earlier description of Lady Wisdom’s invitation, we also read: “She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table.”³ The Lord issues the same kind of invitation as Satan. We have a choice at whose table we eat and drink.

The Hebrew in v.33 speaks of “strange women” instead of “strange things.” The Hebrew word *zuwr* literally means “to turn aside,” but it can also mean “to commit adultery.” It is an established fact that inebriation makes one more susceptible to sexual temptation. As we saw, however, that any unfaithfulness in fellowship with God is called adultery, so we could see in this section about drunkenness more than the effect of and excess of strong drink upon the human mind. It stands for any lack of discipline that would bring us under the control of the Spirit of God.

3. Chapter 24:1-34

1 Do not envy wicked men, do not desire their company;

2 for their hearts plot violence, and their lips talk about making trouble.

As we saw earlier, the Hebrew word *qana*, “envy,” can also be translated “zealous.” *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “envy”: “painful or resentful awareness of another’s advantages.” The Hebrew word goes beyond feeling to action. The envious person in v.1 does not merely harbor envious thoughts in his heart, he does something about it; he seeks the company of the wicked to achieve the same kind of success they appear to have. *The Book of Proverbs* issues several warnings to people who are envious. We read earlier “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD. There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.”⁴ That verse encourages us to take “the long view” of life and look at the present in the light of eternity in order to evaluate the present condition. The same thought is repeated later in the chapter in which we find ourselves at present. Vv. 19 and 20 read: “Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.” Wisdom demonstrates itself in its understanding of the present in the light

1. Prov. 20:1

2. Eph. 5:18

3. Prov. 9:2

4. Prov. 23:17,18

of the future. Scriptures testifies about the “men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”¹

The reason given for avoiding such bad company is the violence these people want to commit. The Hebrew text reads literally: “For their heart studies destruction, and their lips talk of mischief.” A similar warning was given at the beginning of *The Book of Proverbs*, where the father advises his son: “my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood.”² Evidently gang violence is not only a product of our modern age and the warning is still relevant.

**3 By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established;
4 through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures.**

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on these verses: “This constructiveness shows up well against the nihilism of verse 2. It could be literal, but is more probably symbolic, whether of the family (*cf.* 14:1), or of a man’s character, or of any fine enterprise.” The verse referred to reads: “The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.”

The keywords here are *chokmah* “wisdom,” and *tabuwn*, “intelligence.” We stated earlier about *chokmah* that it was “mastery of the art of living in accordance with God’s expectations.” About *tabuwn* we learned that it was a talent, a God-given ability. God said about Bezalel, the man who made the ark of the covenant and did most of the work on the tabernacle: “I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and *knowledge* in all kinds of crafts.”³ If we take “the house” to mean “the family” we see that the focus on the family is actually centered on God. If we dedicate our house to the Lord, that is if we make Christ the head of the home, the Lord will fill the rooms with “rare and beautiful treasures,” that is with love and unity. It is safe to say that the gangs in the previous verses flourish on broken homes. Where children are raised in an atmosphere of love, they will tend to grow up as loving, peaceful individuals.

**5 A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength;
6 for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers.**

These war verses seem to be out of tune with the theme of peace and harmony the previous texts spoke of. We do well to remember that our planet is in a state of war. The beautiful family is as an oasis in the desert. The wisdom and talent needed to build a happy home are also needed to keep the enemy at bay. If we compare these to verses with the two previous ones, we see that the same word for wisdom is used, but the word for “knowledge” is different. The Hebrew word *da`ath*, as we saw earlier, is the word used in “the tree of *knowledge* of good and evil.” It is the cunning the serpent used to seduce our first parents, the craftiness that introduced sin in the world. It is in the face of that enemy that Jesus says to us: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”⁴ It is obvious that the shrewdness the Holy Spirit imparts to us does not lead to evil. But God does not want us to be naïve in the face of the enemy. We must not be like poisonous snakes, but there are some non-venomous snakes that kill vipers and rattlers. Such God wants us to be.

The text also makes clear that God does not want us to be “Lone Rangers” either. Our guidance will come from the Holy Spirit, and the “many advisors” represent the body of Christ, the church.

1. I Chron. 12:32

2. See Prov. 1:10-16, particularly vv.15,16.

3. Ex. 31:3

4. Matt. 10:16

7 Wisdom is too high for a fool; in the assembly at the gate he has nothing to say.

8 He who plots evil will be known as a schemer.

9 The schemes of folly are sin, and men detest a mocker.

10 If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength!

In v.7, “wisdom” is put in the plural. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* explains that it is “not a numerical plural as is evident from the personification and the construction ... one inwardly multiplying and heightening, which is related to *chokmah* as science or the contents of knowledge is to knowledge.” The Hebrew word for high, *ruwm*, has the same double meaning as in English. But there is an element of activity expressed in it. The idea in this verse seems to be that wisdom would take too much effort to trouble with. The verse places the fool “at the gate” that is at the place where the important people of the city gather to voice their opinions and make decisions. The fact that the fool has nothing to say, does not mean that he will not speak, but his words contribute nothing to the matter at hand. As Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases: “Wise conversation is way over the head of fools; in a serious discussion they haven’t a clue.”

V.10 sheds more light on the background against which the city council’s discussion takes place. There is trouble to be faced for which strength is needed. These verses are actually a continuation of the previous ones where war threatens the nation. To withdraw from the light into the darkness, as the fool does while he schemes his folly and mocks his fellowmen who search for solutions, means siding with the enemy. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this nicely: “Fools incubate sin; cynics desecrate beauty.” V.10 may suggest that the fool thinks himself to be strong, but the effect he has upon the situation proves him otherwise. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* points out that there is in this verse “a play on the words (*sara*), ‘adversity,’ and (*sar*), ‘small,’ ‘compressed.’ ”

11 Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.

12 If you say, "But we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?

These verses draw the conditions suggested in the previous section away from the problems of a city under siege or from the problems of a small group to the condition of mankind in general. These words are the most evangelistic in the whole *Book of Proverbs*. It is particularly that feature that gives some Bible scholars trouble. Some interpret it in the context of someone who is unjustly convicted and who will be executed for a crime he did not commit. Others see it against the background of a tyrannical government that treads justice under foot.

Part of the problem is the Old Testament context as a whole. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, therefore, remarks: “It is to be observed that v.11 speaks of one condemned to death generally, and not expressly of one innocently condemned, and makes no distinction between one condemned in war and in peace. One sees from this that the *chokmah* generally has no pleasure in this, that men are put to death by men, not even when it is done legally as punishment for a crime. For, on the one side, it is true that the punishment of the murderer by death is a law proceeding from the nature of the divine holiness and the inviolability of the divine ordinance, and the worth of man as formed in the image of God, and that the magistrate who disowns this law as a law, disowns the divine foundation of his office; but, on the other side, it is just as true that thousands and thousands of innocent persons, or at least persons not worthy of death, have fallen a sacrifice to the abuse or the false application of this law; and that along with the principle of recompensative righteousness, there is a principle of grace which rules in the kingdom of God, and is represented in the O.T. by prophecy and the *chokmah*. It is, moreover, a noticeable fact, that God did not visit with the punishment of death the first murderer, the murderer of the innocent Abel, his brother, but let the principle of grace so far prevail instead of that of law, that He even protected his life against any avenger of blood.”

But we can hardly use these verses as an argument against capital punishment. They reveal, first of all, God's hatred of death, even though the Old Testament specifically prescribes the death penalty for certain crimes. Significant in this context is the excuse given: "We knew nothing about this." And, as the remainder of v.12 suggests, the excuse is invalid because it is untrue. The point seems to be that wisdom gives us insight into the destiny of man, that is the lostness of man. That fills wisdom with compassion which drives to action. The Apostle Paul put this wisdom in words when he wrote to the Corinthians: "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."¹ Paul introduced these words with: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad,"² which is almost a direct quotation of v.12 in this section of Proverbs. God will hold us responsible for the work of evangelism we have done or left undone.

The most extreme case of someone who was unjustly put to death was the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. We could paraphrase the question in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: "Lord, when did we see you lead away to death and staggering toward slaughter and did not help you?" And the Lord's answer is: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me."³

13 Eat honey, my son, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste.

14 Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.

The recommendation in these verses is, obviously, not to develop "a sweet tooth" but rather to search for soul food. Eating honey is symbolic for feeding on wisdom. The main point in the comparison is the pleasure of the experience.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "Honey entered largely into the diet of the Oriental, and was regarded not only as pleasant to the taste and nutritious, but also as possessed of healing powers. It was especially used for children's food (... Isaiah 7:15), and thus becomes an emblem of the purest wisdom. 'I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey,' says the lover in ... Song of Solomon 5:1; and the psalmist says that the ordinances of the Lord are 'sweeter than honey and the honeycomb' ... Palestine was a land flowing with milk and honey (... Exodus 3:8); hence is derived the continual reference to this article of diet in the Bible." The quoted verse in Isaiah reads: "He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right." There is also an indirect reference to the pleasure of reading the Word of God, as in the quoted Psalm verse: "The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."⁴ The Hebrew in v.14 reads literally: "So shall the knowledge of wisdom be to your soul; when you have found it there shall be a reward and your expectation shall not be cut off."

There is also an element of surprise in the verse. The honey here is probably wild honey. There is no record in Scripture to prove that the Israelites were beekeepers. In *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* the author recounts his experience with honey with gusto: "I have often had occasion to remark how much finer

1. II Cor. 5:11,14,15

2. II Cor. 5:10

3. See Matt. 25:44,45.

4. Ps. 19:9^b-11

the flavor of honey is in the honey-comb than it is after it has been expressed from it, and exposed to the action of the air. But it has been asserted that the honeycomb is never eaten; it must be by those who have no acquaintance with the apiary. I have seen the comb with its contained honey eaten frequently, and of it I have repeatedly partaken. And that our Lord ate it, is evident from Luke 24:42. Nor can any man who has not eaten it in this way feel the full force of the allusions to the honey-comb and its sweetness in several parts of the sacred writings.” And *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* asserts: “Those that have tasted honey need no further proof that it is sweet, nor can they by any argument be convinced of the contrary; so those that have experienced the power of truth and godliness are abundantly satisfied of the pleasure of both; they have tasted the sweetness of them, and all the atheists in the world with their sophistry, and the profane with their banter, cannot alter their sentiments.”

**15 Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against a righteous man’s house, do not raid his dwelling place;
16 for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity.
17 Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice,
18 or the LORD will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him.
19 Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of the wicked,
20 for the evil man has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.**

These six verses, although different in character, have in common a critical or hostile attitude towards one’s neighbor. The underlying theme is a feeling of envy, as is expressed in v.19. We can imagine a person with neighbors on either side, one who is righteous and the other evil. Both are looked upon as enemies for reasons not given. For convenience sake, let us call them A, B, and C. The person addressed in these verses is A, the righteous neighbor B and the wicked one C. Neighbor B is, evidently, in trouble, because we read that he may fall. Neighbor C is doing very well materially, because he is the object of A’s envy. A believes he could take advantage of B because of his difficulties. He lies in wait like a robber ready to strike at the right moment. The Lord assures A, however, that B will keep on getting back on his legs and even if he doesn’t, gloating and rejoicing would be out of place. The suffering of Mr. B seems to be the Lord’s chastisement of the righteous. If A volunteers to take an active part in it, simply because of his ill feelings toward his neighbor, the Lord may change His mind about the whole matter.

The prophet Micah describes this proverb from the perspective of Mr. B: “Do not gloat over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the LORD will be my light. Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the LORD’s wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right. He will bring me out into the light; I will see his righteousness. Then my enemy will see it and will be covered with shame, she who said to me, ‘Where is the LORD your God?’ My eyes will see her downfall; even now she will be trampled underfoot like mire in the streets.”¹ The Old Testament testifies to the fact that God severely punished the nations who were His instruments for Israel’s destruction.

Although Mr. B’s fall is probably not moral failure (the Hebrew word *naphal*, “to fall” is usually not used in that sense), v.16 is a good reminder to us not to assume a condemnatory attitude toward those who do fall in that kind of sin. The Apostle Paul says: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”² And Jesus said: “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”³

When A looks to the other side and sees Mr. C’s prosperity, he becomes envious. The first verse of this chapter issued a warning against this feeling. The Hebrew word used in v.19 is not the same as in v.1. The word *charah* literally means “to blaze up.” *Qana*’ which is used in v.1 shows that it means “burning

1. Micah 7:8-10
2. Gal. 6:1
3. John 8:8

with jealousy.” A feels himself being inwardly consumed by the fire of jealousy. Asaph wrote a whole Psalm about this kind of emotion. He recognized it as sin, saying: “But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.”¹ He came to the conclusion that the objects of his jealousy were headed for destruction: “Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.”² And he realized that, knowing the Lord was a greater riches than anything else other people possessed. “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”³ The essence of wisdom is seeing things in life in their proper perspective.

**21 Fear the LORD and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious,
22 for those two will send sudden destruction upon them, and who knows what calamities they can bring?**

The difficult word in v.21 is *shanah*, which literally means “to fold,” or “to duplicate,” “to transmute.” In addition to this verse, *The Book of Proverbs* uses this verb three other times, every time with a different shade of meaning. “He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever *repeats* the matter separates close friends.”⁴ “As a dog *returns* to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.”⁵ “It is not for kings, O Lemuel — not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what the law decrees, and *deprive* all the oppressed of their rights.”⁶ The word “rebellious” may be rendered “revolutionaries.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, renders the verse: “Fear God, dear child — respect your leaders; don’t be defiant or mutinous.”

The mention of the LORD and the king in the same breath implies that worldly authority is ordained by God. The Apostle Paul confirms this in his Epistle to the Romans: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”⁷ And the Apostle Peter states the same: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”⁸

The New International Version’s rendering of these verses sounds simple and clear, but a glance at the Hebrew text and at the vast variety of interpretations reveals that these verses present an interpreter’s nightmare. To give a few examples: *The New King James Version* reads: “My son, fear the LORD and the king; Do not associate with those given to change; For their calamity will rise suddenly, And who knows the ruin those two can bring?” *The Revised Standard Version*: “My son, fear the LORD and the king, and do not disobey either of them; for disaster from them will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin that will come

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1. Ps. 73:2,21,22
 2. Ps. 73:18-20
 3. Ps. 73:25,26
 4. Prov. 17:9
 5. Prov. 26:11
 6. Prov. 31:4,5
 7. Rom. 13:1,2
 8. I Peter 2:13-17

from them both?” *The Living Bible*: “My son, watch your step before the Lord and the king, and don’t associate with radicals. For you will go down with them to sudden disaster, and who knows where it all will end?” And *The New Living Translation*: “My child, fear the LORD and the king, and don’t associate with rebels. For you will go down with them to sudden disaster. Who knows where the punishment from the LORD and the king will end?”

Further Sayings of the Wise

23 *These also are sayings of the wise: To show partiality in judging is not good:*

24 *Whoever says to the guilty, "You are innocent" — peoples will curse him and nations denounce him.*

25 *But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come upon them.*

Although our outline covers vv.24-34 under the same heading “Proverbs Concerning Various Situations,” these verses seem to constitute another appendix to Solomon’s Proverbs. *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that the *Septuagint* makes the introductory words a personal address, reading: “This I say to you so that you may learn.” But the *Commentary* believes this to be a mistake.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, points out that some of the proverbs in this section show a strong resemblance with *Teaching of Amenemope*, an Egyptian wisdom selection, probably dating from the twelfth century B.C. There is a possibility that some of these proverbs made it into the canon of Scripture via Moses.

The topic is the administration of justice. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “justice” as “the administration of what is just (as by assigning merited rewards or punishments).” And “just” is defined as “having a basis in or conforming to fact or reason.” Justice is a divine attribute. David sings in the Psalms: “The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice.”¹ The Hebrew word *meysnar* literally means “evenness.” This is appropriately represented in the image of the Greek goddess who is blindfolded and holds a pair of scales in her hands.

Actually, divine justice goes well beyond the image of the balance. God does not use a mathematical formula to determine guilt or innocence. He takes motives into account among several other factors. The ultimate measure of His grace will be the matter of our trust in Him. Speaking about the Holy Spirit, Jesus made the profound statement: “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.”²

The verses before us, however, speak of the way humans must apply justice in a human society. We do not have the option of paying for someone’s guilt with our own blood, as the Son of God had. We cannot say, like He did to a woman guilty of adultery: “Then neither do I condemn you.”³

26 *An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.*

The Hebrew text reads literally: “Every man shall kiss his lips that give a right answer.” Eugene H. Petersons, in *Proverbs*, tones this down to: “An honest answer is like a warm hug.” The Living Bible dims the glow even more with: “It is an honor to receive a frank reply.” The problem is obviously our cultural approach, not to frank words but to kissing. In our western culture kissing on the lips is erotic. Only couples in love do so. In some countries lip kissing has no more meaning than a handshake. We may assume that, although embraces and kisses were used in Israel, a kiss on the lips had a deeper meaning, although it may not have carried the strong erotic meaning as in our western society.

1. Ps. 9:7,8
2. John 16:8-11
3. John 8:11

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes: “The Hebrew admits of another sense, and with less ellipsis: ‘He that giveth a right answer shall kiss lips;’ i.e., A good answer is as good as a kiss. The good answerer does a thing as grateful as a friend does who kisses his friend. He removes doubts and errors, vices and perplexities.” Some Bible scholars interpret the verse as if someone presses his lips together as if reflecting upon the matter before giving the right answer. I prefer the more literal version of the kiss on the lips! I wonder if the text allows us to turn it around and say that a kiss on the lips is like an honest answer. Much depends on what the question is. Some “proposals” would call for such an answer.

Finally, *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “An answer that is fair and suitable to the circumstances is as pleasant and assuring to the bearers as a kiss on the lips. Such a salutation would be a natural sign of sympathy and affection. Thus Absalom won the hearts of the people by kissing those who came to court with their suits (...2 Samuel 15:5). In ... Genesis 41:40, where the Authorized Version has, ‘According to thy word shall all my people be ruled,’ the Hebrew runs, ‘Thy mouth shall all my people kiss,’ i.e. they shall do homage to thee, which is another signification of this action. This, however, would not be suitable here, as the kiss is supposed to be given by the speaker, though the LXX. mistakenly translates, ‘But men will kiss lips that answer good words.’ ”

27 Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that, build your house.

This verse deals with priorities in life. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases: “First plant your fields, *then* build your barn.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, writes: “The housebuilding probably means the founding of a family (*cf.* 14:1): a matter that must wait its turn till *afterwards*. As, in a rural economy, well-worked fields justify and nourish the farm-house, so a well-ordered life (in things material and immaterial) should be established before marriage.” The proverb referred to is “The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.”

We observe that, logically, without a house all work is outdoors. That truth suggests that the proverb ought not to be taken in its literal sense, at least not primarily. The first and most obvious application is that the harvest of a field lays the foundation for life in the home. A house needs more than one foundation. Homes and families are built on more than concrete and stone alone. Jesus gave a spiritual sense to this proverb when He concluded *The Sermon on the Mount* with these words: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”¹ The foundation of each life ought to be Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul testified: “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”² No home can be built securely without that foundation. Jesus Christ and His Word is the foundation God lays for each life and each family to be built on. Disregarding that basis is tantamount to foolishness. Acknowledgement of the foundation God laid is the first priority in life.

If we seek genuine fulfillment in life we cannot take shortcuts or cut corners. This is true for our personal life as well for our relationships with others. The building of a house suggests the raising of a family, that is, bonding with others.

Barnes’ Notes observes: “The words [are] a warning against a hasty and imprudent marriage. The young man is taught to cultivate his land before he has to bear the burdens of a family. Further, in a spiritual sense, the ‘field’ may be the man’s outer common work, the ‘house’ the dwelling-place of his higher life. He

1. Matt. 7:24-27

2. I Cor. 3:10,11

must do the former faithfully in order to attain the latter. Neglect in one is fatal to the other. Compare Luke 16:10-11.” The quoted reference reads: “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?” That adds significantly to the perspective of life. We do more on earth than building on our temporary dwellings. There will be a time when, in the words of The Preacher, “man goes to his eternal home.”¹ And we do well to work our fields on earth in preparation for eternity before we move on.

28 Do not testify against your neighbor without cause, or use your lips to deceive.

29 Do not say, "I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did."

These two verses do not speak about justice but they are rife with revenge and dishonesty. The context suggests that the charges against the neighbor are trumped up and that the reason for bringing in accusations is not linked to any punishable act. According to the law, the neighbor is the person we must love as ourselves. The law says: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”²

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The Hebrew is really interrogative, ‘And wouldest thou deceive with thy lips?’ (...Psalm 78:36). The deceit is not so much intentional falsehood as misrepresentation arising from haste and inconsiderateness consequent on this unnecessary eagerness to push forward testimony unsought. Septuagint, ‘Neither exaggerate ... with thy lips.’ ” The verse from Psalms quoted reads: “But then they would flatter him with their mouths, lying to him with their tongues.”

30 I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;

31 thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins.

32 I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw:

33 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest —

34 and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.

This section ends with an illustration and application that refer to v.27 where the advice was given to make work outside the first priority. The thorns and weeds and the condition of the fence around the vineyard serve as a warning against laziness. Eugene H. Peterson’s vivid paraphrase is worth copying: “One day I walked by the field of an old lazybones, and then passed the vineyard of a lout; They were overgrown with weeds, thick with thistles, all the fences broken down. I took a long look and pondered what I saw; the fields preached me a sermon and I listened: ‘A nap here, a nap there, a day off here, a day off there, sit back, take it easy—do you know what comes next? Just this: You can look forward to a dirt-poor life, with poverty as your permanent houseguest!’ ”

We have met the *`atsel*, “the sluggard” before. His sluggishness is caused by a “lack of judgment,” *leb* in Hebrew. As we saw earlier, *leb* means “the heart, the will, or the intellect.” The suggestion is that this person not only lacks divine wisdom, but even the most human common sense is not there.

If we look at these verses in the context of the curse, we see that more is in them than a warning against common laziness. After the first human pair fell in sin, God said to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”³ The sluggard not only takes it easy on his daily chores, he denies the reality of sin. He practices the ultimate

1. See Eccl. 12:5.

2. Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39

3. Gen. 3:19

liberal theology, refusing to take a stand against the corruption in his own life. If we allow thorns and weeds to take over in the vineyard of our life and we let the wall of protection crumble, we will be the victims of ruin. Spiritual bankruptcy will be the end.

The opposite picture of this failure is what Jesus drew for us when He said: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”¹ In a way, the sluggard is not the person who does not work up a sweat, but the one who tries to do it all himself, disregarding Jesus’ words: “apart from me you can do nothing.”

IV. Proverbs of Solomon Copied by Hezekiah’s Men 25:1—29:27

A. Proverbs Regulating Relationships with Others 25:1—26:28

1. Relationships with Kings 25:1-7^a

1 More Proverbs of Solomon

These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah:

2 It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.

3 As the heavens are high and the earth is deep, so the hearts of kings are unsearchable.

4 Remove the dross from the silver, and out comes material for the silversmith;

5 remove the wicked from the king’s presence, and his throne will be established through righteousness.

6 Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and do not claim a place among great men;

7 it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The word ‘also’² implies that a previous collection was known to the compiler of the present book — probably the one which we have in Proverbs 10-22:16, of which nine proverbs are inserted here. But there was still a large number of proverbial sayings attributed to Solomon, and preserved partly by oral tradition and partly in writing, which it was advisable to collect and secure before they were lost. The zeal of Hezekiah took this in hand. He was not, as far as we know, an author himself, but he evidently felt a warm interest in literature, and ‘the men of Hezekiah,’ not mentioned elsewhere, must have been his counsellors and scholars, to whom was entrusted the duty of gathering together into a volume the scattered sayings of the wise king. Among those contemporaries, doubtless, Isaiah was eminent, and it is not improbable that Shebna the scribe and Josh the chronicler were members of the learned fraternity (...2 Kings 18:18).”

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on “The glory of kings”: “Verse 2 appropriately opens Hezekiah’s collection, for he was exemplifying the maxim by his enquiring zeal. But it is chiefly praising not academic research but administrative probes: the king should know what is going on. Mystery has its place, and the autocrat knows how to keep his counsel (3); but mystery also shelters the worthless and breeds corruption (4,5) (5b repeats 16:12b). An evil harbored is even more unsettling than an evil exposed.” The verse referred to in Chapter 16 reads: “Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness.”

1. John 15:1-5

2. “Also” is the word used in the KJV; the NIV uses “more.”

The Hebrew word *kabowd* occurs twice in v.2. *The New International Version* renders it twice “glory,” but *The King Version* reads once “glory” and once “honor.” Its literal meaning is “weight.” The Apostle Paul used this typical Hebrew idiom in the verse: “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”¹ *The King James Version* reads: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” *Kabowd* is rendered differently in various contexts, as for instance in: “Jacob heard that Laban’s sons were saying, ‘Jacob has taken everything our father owned and has gained all this *wealth* from what belonged to our father.’”² David uses it in some of his Psalms in different ways: “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices.”³ And “Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn.”⁴ In *The Book of Proverbs* we find it, among others, in the verse: “Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.”⁵

“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter” could mean that it is God’s character to hide because if He would reveal Himself in all His fullness mankind would not survive. God said to Moses: “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”⁶ But ultimately, we will see His glory and we will spend eternity penetrating into this mystery. We read in Revelation: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”⁷

It would be an understatement to say that there is a mystery about the godhead. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes T. Cartwright who said: “He would not be God if His counsels and works did not transcend human intelligence.” Moses seems to suggest that God intends to keep His mysteries a secret for us. He said: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”⁸ And the Apostle Paul appears to concur: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”⁹ But our verse in Proverbs would have no meaning if this were the case in eternity.

The Pulpit Commentary observes about the meaning of God’s glory: “That which is the chief glory of God is his mysteriousness, the unfathomable character of his nature and attributes and doings. The more we search into these matters, the more complete we find our ignorance to be; finite faculties are utterly unable to comprehend the infinite; they can embrace merely what God chooses to reveal.” But about the glory of the kings, the *Commentary* takes a different line. We read: “The contrast between the glory of God and that of the king lies in this — that whereas both God and the king desire man’s welfare, the former promotes this by making him feel his ignorance and littleness and entire dependence upon this mysterious Being whose nature and designs mortals cannot understand; the latter advances the good of his subjects by giving them confidence in his zeal and power to discover truth, and using his knowledge for their benefit. Septuagint, ‘The glory of God conceals a word ... but the glory of a king honors matters.’”

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1. II Cor. 4:17
 2. Gen. 31:1
 3. Ps. 16:9
 4. Ps. 57:8
 5. Prov. 3:16
 6. Ex. 33:20
 7. Rev. 22:4
 8. Deut. 29:29
 9. Rom. 11:33

It seems more logical to interpret here that it is that which God hides about Himself is the matter that kings are searching to find out. God uses His mystery to draw us out of ourselves to Himself. Knowing God ultimately means knowing His secrets. As David sings in the Psalms: “The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.”¹ Or, as *The King James Version* reads: “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.” The Hebrew word in that verse is not *kabowd* but *cowd*, which literally means “a session,” or “company of persons.” It stands for intimacy. In that sense we find it in the proverb: “The LORD detests a perverse man but takes the upright into his confidence.”² To know God is the equivalent of sharing His holiness, which is God’s desire for our lives.³

V.3 reads literally in Hebrew: “The heaven for height, and the earth for depth, and the heart of kings [is] unsearchable.” The line of thought of the preceding verse continues here. Some Bible commentators interpret this as if it is hazardous to try to figure out upon whom the king will bestow his favor and whom he will disregard. Some even see in this a warning against criticizing the government. But we believe that the matter is more profound. Man, being created in God’s image and likeness, has some mysteries in common with his Creator. There is a sense in which we do not know ourselves. Man is a mystery to himself. It is also true that we will know ourselves more in the measure in which we increase in our knowledge of God.

The first application of vv.4 and 5 is undoubtedly to those that surround the king and serve him with their counsel. A deeper application is to make these verses look beyond the king’s counsellors into the human heart. After all, the king’s heart is susceptible to the counsel given, whether good or bad. If the king’s heart were totally pure it could not be influenced by bad counsel. Everyman’s heart is in a sense a throne room from which the human life is governed. We use the picture of ceding the throne of our heart to the Lord Jesus Christ to illustrate what it means when we surrender to God’s authority.

The image of refining of silver or gold as an image of sanctification is used frequently in Scripture. We read earlier “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart.”⁴ Isaiah prophesied: “I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your judges as in days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City. Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.” Malachi stated: “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness.”⁵ In Peter’s First Epistle we read: “These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”⁶ And Paul wrote to Timothy: “In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”⁷ Paul’s words may come closest to the text in Proverbs before us. The Hebrew of v.4 reads literally: “Take away the dross from the silver and there shall come forth a vessel for the finer.”

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1. Ps. 25:14
 2. Prov. 3:32
 3. See Heb. 12:10.
 4. Prov. 17:3
 5. Mal. 3:3
 6. I Peter 1:7
 7. Tim. 2:20,21

The last two verses of this section turn the camera away from the king to his counsellors. This reminds us of the scene Luke describes of the Passover celebration of Jesus and His disciples on the eve of the crucifixion. We read: “Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.”¹ Jesus probably thought of this proverb when He said: “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this man your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.”²

It is not uncommon for any human being to overestimate his own importance. We believe that other people ought to recognize and honor us and we value more what humans think about us than what we are before God. Jesus said to the people of His day: “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”³ If we take this advice and apply it to our relationship with God, it becomes even more relevant. Not many of us are ushered into the presence of kings or world leaders. But we will all eventually appear before God. Whether we realize it or not, every human being lives in the presence of the Omnipresent. The Apostle Paul writes: “[God] chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’”⁴

2. Relationships with Neighbors 25:8-20

8 do not bring hastily to court, for what will you do in the end if your neighbor puts you to shame?

9 If you argue your case with a neighbor, do not betray another man’s confidence,

10 or he who hears it may shame you and you will never lose your bad reputation.

These verses take us into a courtroom and issue a warning against hastily filing complaints. Suing people or institutions for excessive amounts of money has become a favorite activity in the United States of America. The danger is always there that the plaintive loses and has to pay the lawyers other expenses. The Scriptures call this “to be put to shame.” In modern society “shame” can mean “bankruptcy.”

The case in the verses before us is against a neighbor, that is the person we are told “to love as ourselves.” The reason for bringing him to court is a hasty jump to conclusions about something that was seen or heard but not fully understood. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, catches well the thought behind this verse with his paraphrase: “Don’t jump to conclusions—there may be a perfectly good explanation for what you just saw.”

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: “The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.”⁵ It ought to be a tenet for Christian not to sue.

V.9 does not specify whose confidence is being betrayed. Some Bible scholars, in connection with these verses, refer to Jesus’ statement about dealing with other people’s sin. Jesus put down the guidelines when He said: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he

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1. Luke 22:24
 2. Luke 14:8-10
 3. John 5:44
 4. I Cor. 1:28,29, 31
 5. I Cor. 6:7,8

listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”¹ The “confidence” may refer to this private conversation that is meant to clear the air between two people considered to be brothers. According to the Apostle Paul, brotherly love “is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”²

The Hebrew word rendered “betray” in *The New International Version*, “discover,” in *The King James Version* is *galah*, which literally means “to denude.” It is usually used in a disgraceful sense as in the story of Noah about whom we read: “When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay *uncovered* inside his tent.”³ But it can also refer to God’s revelation of Himself as in the case of Jacob. We read: “There he built an altar, and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God *revealed* himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.”⁴ *The Book of Proverbs* uses the word mainly in the context of gossiping. We read: “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.”⁵ And “A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.”⁶ There are cases in which the law protects client confidentiality as in a confession booth, a patient-doctor relationship, and others. That is probably not what this text deals with. As children of the Lord we must develop a reputation of being able to keep other people’s secrets and not be known as a blabbermouth.

11 A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

12 Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man’s rebuke to a listening ear.

13 Like the coolness of snow at harvest time is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the spirit of his masters.

14 Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give.

These verses do more than praise eloquence; they put the miracle of speech in poetry and song. The first three verses state that words can be precious jewels; the last verse tells the opposite story of a counterfeit. The “word aptly spoken” is the right word at the right place. It is the word that more closely resembles the Word of God, the Word that called all into existence. Most human speech is far removed from the Incarnate Word, but those utterances that redeem and heal show a resemblance to the original.

Bible scholars have argued about the meaning of the “apples of gold.” Some believe them to be real apples of gold color, the ones one can eat. The comparison between the word and the apple would then be like the comparison between the ear and the mouth. Some take the apples to be oranges or apricots. They may even be tomatoes, since “golden apple” in Italian means “tomato.” The problem in taking the fruit as edible instead of ornamental is that we must interpret the silver setting literally also. Some interpreters do this. But the relationship of this verse with the following seems to require the ornament rather than the edible fruit.

Barnes’ Notes comments on this verse: “[Apples of gold] Probably the golden colored fruit set in baskets (i.e., chased vessels of open worked silver); so is a word spoken upon its wheels (i.e., moving

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1. Matt. 18:15-17
 2. See I Cor. 13:4-7.
 3. Gen. 9:21
 4. Gen. 35:7
 5. Prov. 11:13
 6. Prov. 20:19

quickly and quietly on its way). The proverb may have had its origin in some kingly gift to the son of David, the work of Tyrian artists, like Hiram and his fellows. Others gazed on the cunning work and admired, but the wise king saw in the costly rarity a parable of something higher. 'A word well set upon the wheels of speech' excelled it. Ornamentation of this kind in the precious metals was known, even as late as in the middle ages, as oeuvre de Salomon."

V.12 seems to put the previous verse into sharper focus. The aptly spoken word is a rebuke. What makes it so precious is the wisdom of the speaker. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, put the two proverbs together, saying: "The right word at the right time is like a custom-made piece of jewelry, And a wise friend's timely reprimand is like a gold ring slipped on your finger." Peterson may have exchanged the finger for the ear because he did not like the idea of a man wearing an earring. The verse, incidentally, seems to indicate that men wore earrings in Solomon's time. Actually, the Hebrew word *nezem* can mean any kind of ring. The only other time the word is used in *The Book of Proverbs* is in "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion,"¹ where it refers to a nose ring. We observe that a wise man's rebuke will only be valued if the ear that hears belongs to a wise person also. Rebukes are not generally appreciated that way. It takes wisdom to accept criticism in a positive way. The attitude of acceptance is what makes it into an ornament that adds beauty to life.

V.13 can hardly be taken as meaning that it would snow at harvest time in Palestine. This verse does not speak about the weather but about coolness. Harvest time was the hot time of the year and the "trustworthy messenger" is like an ice-cold drink. Solomon had said earlier: "Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land."² Solomon also said: "A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing."³ Here it is not so much the message but the person who brings it that causes the delight. The trustworthy messenger in Hebrew is *tsiyar aman*. The first time we encounter the word *aman* in Scripture is in the verse "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."⁴

It is important to note that it is the faithfulness of the one who was sent that refreshes the one who sent him. Paul's words to the Corinthians can be seen as a commentary on this verse. We read: "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."⁵ When we become servants of Christ our faithfulness will benefit us as much as it causes joy to our Master. It is to the faithful servant that Jesus says: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"⁶

V.14 continues with the weather. In order to appreciate the setting we have to understand the climate of the place on earth where this statement was made. Some people living in areas where rainfall is abundant may enjoy days in which the clouds hold the water instead of constantly pouring it out.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states about the weather in Palestine: "In the summer months there is no rain, so that the rains of the spring and fall seasons are absolutely essential for starting and maturing the crops. The lack of this rain in the proper time has often been the cause of complete failure of the harvest. A small difference in the amount of these seasonal rains makes a large difference in the possibility of growing various crops without irrigation. The summer months are practically rainless, with

1. Prov. 11:22

2. Prov. 25:25

3. Prov. 13:17

4. Gen. 15:6

5. I Cor. 4:1,2

6. See Matt. 25:21,23.

very few clouds appearing in the sky. From May 1 to the middle of October one can be sure of no rain; ‘The winter is past; the rain is over’ (Song 2:11), so many sleep on the roofs of the houses or in tents of leaves and branches in the fields and vineyards throughout the summer. The continuous hot droughts make the people appreciate the springs and fountains of fresh running water and the cool shade of rock and tree. The rainy season from October to May may be divided into three parts, the former, the winter, and the latter rains, and they are often referred to under these names in the Old Testament. The ‘former rains’ are the showers of October and the first part of November. They soften the parched ground so that the winter grain may be sown before the heavy continuous rains set in. The main bulk of the rain falls in the months of December, January and February. Although in these months the rains are frequent and heavy, a dark, foggy day is seldom seen. The ‘latter rains’ of April are the most highly appreciated, because they ripen the fruit and stay the drought of summer. They were considered a special blessing: Yahweh ‘will come as the latter rain that watereth the earth’ (Hos 6:3); ‘They opened their mouth wide as for the latter rain’ (Job 29:23); and as a reason for worshipping Yahweh who sent them, ‘Let us now fear Yahweh our God, that giveth rain, both the former and the latter, in its season’ (Jer 5:24).”

Having read the local weather report, let us look at the lesson in v.14. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Whoso boasts himself of a false gift [is like] clouds and wind without rain.” The topic is an empty promise. Some people feel the need to present themselves as being generous without either having the means or the intent to give. Some of the Lord’s servants, yours truly included, have been the victim of such promises. The Psalmist warns us: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save.”¹ Paul’s advice to the Christians in Corinth seems to comprise this warning. We read: “And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.”² The main lesson, of course, is not only not to expect too much from people who make promises, but to be truthful ourselves in carrying out the promises we make.

15 Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.

The King James Version reads: “By long forbearing is a prince persuaded, and a soft tongue breaketh the bone.” Some Bible scholars object that one does not show forbearance to a prince. To this Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, answers: “But the quality that is praised is the refusal to be provoked, and the point is that so unassuming a weapon may win surprising victories.” We could add that one does not break his bones either. The popular saying declares that one cannot fight city hall. This proverb states that there is hope if the way in which the petition is presented is by gentle persistence. Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases: “Patient persistence pierces indifference; gentle speech breaks down rigid defenses.” When we speak of breaking someone’s bones, we usually do not envision gentle words. There are, however, different ways to break a rock. A steady drop of water will ultimately have the same effect as dynamite. Admittedly, water takes longer than dynamite, but in the light of eternity that does not matter. The prophet Zechariah answered the frustration of the Jews who were hindered in rebuilding the temple: “So [the angel] said to me, ‘This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty.”³

16 If you find honey, eat just enough — too much of it, and you will vomit.

17 Seldom set foot in your neighbor’s house — too much of you, and he will hate you.

1. Ps. 146:3
2. II Cor. 8:10-12
3. Zech. 4:6

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, updates the imagery with the paraphrase: “When you’re given a box of candy, don’t gulp it all down; eat too much chocolate and you’ll make yourself sick; And when you find a friend, don’t outwear your welcome; show up at all hours and he’ll soon get fed up.” The two verses say the same thing. V.16 is not really about honey but about moderation in any type of relationship. The lesson is in a nutshell “Do not be too sweet!” The question is can one love something or someone too much? And the answer must be “yes and no.” The commandment “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”¹ puts no limits on our love for God. But “love your neighbor as yourself” sets limits both to self-love as to neighborly love. V.27 will elaborate more on the subject. The temptation in wanting too much of a good thing is that when we give the same energy and intensity to our human relationships as to our relationship with God, human relations will eventually supersede our love of God and that is the essence of idolatry. Satan knows the value of honey and that it catches more flies than vinegar.

18 Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor.

19 Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble.

20 Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.

These three verses continue on the theme of human relations but the setting is negative. There is more than one way to kill someone. The Apostle John writes: “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”² Clubs, swords and arrows are weapons meant to kill. V.18 states that words can kill as much as weapons of wood or steel. There is an element of surprise in this verse. The neighbor, evidently, expected his friend to be on his side. The discovery that he turned against him in the courtroom hurts him deeply and kills the friendship. Jesus expressed this hurt when He asked: “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”³

V.19 continues the same thought by elaborating on the neighbor’s experience. The neighbor had trusted his friend and believed him to be faithful. He believed that he would come to his help in times of trouble. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Confidence in an unfaithful man [is like] a broken tooth or a foot out of joint.” The pain of betrayal is like a physical pain, only worse.

V.20 may be the only chemistry lesson in the Old Testament. Singing to someone who needs compassion and sympathy creates the wrong chemistry. The Apostle Paul advises: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”⁴ The extreme Biblical example is in the Psalm that reads: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”⁵ Those who had so cruelly killed the Jewish infants asked the parents to sing for them.⁶

We ought to be alert and sensitive to people’s emotional needs. As there is more than one way to kill someone, so there is more than one way to leave someone in the cold. God wants us to be moved with compassion for one another in times of suffering.

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1. Deut. 6:5
 2. I John 3:15
 3. See Luke 22:48.
 4. Rom. 12:15
 5. Ps. 137:1-3
 6. cf. Ps. 137:8,9.

3. Relationships with Enemies 25:21-24

21 If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.

22 In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.

23 As a north wind brings rain, so a sly tongue brings angry looks.

24 Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, writes above vv.21,22 the heading: “The best revenge.” He comments: “This saying is the topmost of a cluster of peaks (see 24:11,12,17,18,29) which are all outcrops of an underlying care for others and faith in God presupposed throughout the book.” The best illustration of this proverb is in the story of Elisha and the king of Aram who sent his army to capture the prophet. We read: “As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, ‘Strike these people with blindness.’ So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked. Elisha told them, ‘This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for.’ And he led them to Samaria. After they entered the city, Elisha said, ‘LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see.’ Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria. When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, ‘Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?’ ‘Do not kill them,’ he answered. ‘Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master.’ So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel’s territory.”¹

The Apostle Paul puts this proverb in the context of God’s vengeance, suggesting that the manifestation of God’s wrath may be different from what we expect it to be. We read: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’”² To literally put burning coals on someone’s head would, of course, be cruel torture. To do it figuratively means to induce such an overwhelming feeling of shame in the other that it may lead to his conversion. The best way to get rid of enemies is to make them friends. That is, evidently, what God intends to do with us. That may be the purpose of His wrath! This thought is emphasized by the addition: “and the LORD will reward you.” Doing this means doing what God would do.

V.23 keeps us in the weather channel by comparing the effect of “a sly tongue” with a chilly north wind. But the proverb is more complicated and has raised more controversy than one would expect. The Hebrew text reads literally: “The north wind drives away rain: so does an angry countenance a backbiting tongue.” The Hebrew text at our disposal may be influenced by Jerome’s translation, *The Vulgate*, and by Jewish commentators. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states that it “is supported by geography and by the Heb. word-order in line 2.” “But,” the *Commentary* continues, “this order is not decisive, and ‘driveth away’ is a wishful translation: the word normally means *bringeth forth*, as in RV, RSV. So Moffatt: ‘North winds bring rain: slander brings angry looks.’ Since, however, in Palestine the north is noted for dry weather, it is hard to account for such a simile. Of the suggested solutions perhaps the best is ... that the saying originated outside Palestine.” In Elihu’s speech to Job, we read: “Now no one can look at the sun, bright as it is in the skies after the wind has swept them clean. Out of the north he comes in golden splendor; God comes in awesome majesty.”³ But there is no indication that the setting in Job was in Palestine. It is, therefore, difficult to determine whether the proverb means that the angry look, which is the result of the gossip, makes the talker stop, or whether the talking produces the angry reaction. If there is any connection between vv.23 and 24

1. II Kings 6:18-23

2. See Rom. 12:19,20.

3. Job 37:21,22

one would say that the husband's anger has no effect upon the quarrelsome wife, otherwise his moving out would not be warranted. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* draws a conclusion in favor of *The King James Version's* reading: "The English version gives an excellent idea: If you do not listen to, but frown on, the backbiter, you put him to silence. The receiver of slanders gives impetus to, and shares the guilt of, the slanderer (Rom 1:32). Backbiters would have no place if there were not ears itching to hear their tales." The verse in Romans reads: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." We encountered the statement in v.24 earlier.¹

4. Relationships with Yourself 25:25-28

25 Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land.

26 Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked.

27 It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honorable to seek one's own honor.

28 Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.

There is a lot of unexplained nostalgia in v.25. We are not told if the one who receives the good news is at home or abroad, or where the one who sends it is. If the receiver is away from home and feels homesick, the verse has one kind of meaning; if the message is sent home, it has another content. In order to appreciate the impact of the verse, in whatever direction it may travel, we have to move out of our present age of telephone connections, newscasters, e-mail and instant messaging.

We saw the comparison between good news and a sense of refreshment in an earlier proverb: "Like the coolness of snow at harvest time is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the spirit of his masters."² *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "We do not know that the Hebrews were great travelers in those days; but any communication from a distant country would be very uncertain in arriving at its destination, and would at any rate take a long time in transmission, in most cases there would be nothing to rest upon but vague report, or a message carried by some traveling merchant." And: "The ancient commentators have seen in this news from a distant country the announcement of Christ's birth by the angels at Bethlehem, or the preaching of the gospel that tells of the joys of heaven, the land that is very far off (... Isaiah 33:17)." The quotation from Isaiah reads: "Your eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar."

Taking v.25 out of the context of a message between one human being and another in different locations and applying it to a word from heaven to earth makes more sense than one would expect from a first glance at these verses. It provides a better connection between the four verses copied above. If we consider ourselves to be citizens of heaven, as the Apostle Paul states,³ we know that our citizenship is based on the Good News received from above. The Gospel is undoubtedly the greatest quencher of thirst as well as the greatest transformer of life. And transformation of life is what the next three verses are about.

These verses put the advice in the negative but it is not difficult to draw positive applications from them. The "muddied well" in v.26 describes the damage done to our spiritual relationships if we yield to peer pressure or any other pressure to conform to the standards of the world. The Apostle Paul warns: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world."⁴ J.B. Phillips, in *The New Testament in Modern English*, renders this "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold." A clear Biblical example of one who yielded to pressure is Lot in Sodom, whom the Apostle Peter called "a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was

1. See Prov. 21:9.

2. Prov. 25:13

3. See Phil. 3:21.

4. Rom. 12:2

tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard).¹ The righteous man who conforms to worldly standards of morality, not only muddies the water that quenches his own soul, he also loses his testimony as a believer. The Scripture verse compares him to a muddied well, meaning that he no longer refreshes those around him by his clean living. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, calls this “the spreading of the poison of compromise.”

V.27 traces the root of the problem by revealing that the tendency to yield is fed by a desire for honor. There was an earlier warning in connection with honey in this chapter: “If you find honey, eat just enough — too much of it, and you will vomit.”² The caution is not against honey but against excess. Honor in itself is not bad but too much of it or coming from the wrong source can make it bad. Jesus says “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”³ He also said: “My Father will honor the one who serves me.”⁴ We must develop “a sweet tooth” in seeking the Father’s honor by serving Christ.

Young’s Literal Translation of v.28 reads: “A city broken down without walls, [Is] a man without restraint over his spirit!” “Restraint over his spirit” is a more accurate rendering than “self-control.” A city with broken down walls faces no danger if there is no enemy around to attack. We need to be spiritually alert and in fellowship with God because we face an enemy who seeks to destroy us spiritually.

The cluster of verses in this section issues a warning against the world, the flesh and the devil. The redeeming factor is the Good News from the distant land, our homeland toward which we are traveling.

5. Relationships with Fools 26:1-12

- 1 Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, honor is not fitting for a fool.**
- 2 Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest.**
- 3 A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools!**
- 4 Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.**
- 5 Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.**
- 6 Like cutting off one’s feet or drinking violence is the sending of a message by the hand of a fool.**
- 7 Like a lame man’s legs that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.**
- 8 Like tying a stone in a sling is the giving of honor to a fool.**
- 9 Like a thornbush in a drunkard’s hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.**
- 10 Like an archer who wounds at random is he who hires a fool or any passer-by.**
- 11 As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.**
- 12 Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.**

The Hebrew word, rendered “fool” in this section is *keciyl*, which literally means “fat,” mostly in the sense of “stupid,” or “silly.” The English term “fathead” would be a good equivalent. Derek Kidner, in his introduction in *Proverbs*, states about *keciyl*: “In himself, he has no idea of a patient search for wisdom: he has not the concentration for it (‘a fool’s eyes are in the ends of the earth,’ 17:24), but imagines it can be handed out to him over the counter (‘Why does a fool offer the sage a fee, when he has no mind to learn?’ 17:16 Moffatt). So he ‘laps up’ his opinions unreflectingly ... and pours them out freely (15:2), unaware that he is only displaying his folly as a trader spreads out his goods (13:16). His sage remarks either fall flat or turn round on him (26:7,9); but he will never realize this, for he cannot imagine himself mistaken. ‘A rebuke enters deeper into a discerning man than a hundred stripes into a fool’ (17:10). The root of his trouble is spiritual, not mental.”

1. II Peter 2:7,8
2. Prov. 25:16
3. John 5:44
4. John 12:26^b

Another word, rendered “fool,” not found in this section is *‘eviył*. It has the meaning of being perverse. The third word, *nabal*, denotes wicked stupidity, usually in the sense of being impious.

In Palestine it does not rain or snow in the months of June and July. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “Rain would have hindered the gathering in of the fruits of the earth, and the threshing which was done in the open air.” And Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “*Rain in harvest* suggests that damage, not only incongruity, comes of capricious evaluations. (The present age, through the tricks of publicity, is especially prone to idolize ‘vain and light persons,’ for whom the treatment of verse 3 might be better medicine.)” The honor bestowed upon a fool points to more than a verbal expression of admiration. Voting a wicked person into office would be a better illustration of what is meant here. That would be particularly hurtful if the exercise of power requires spiritual understanding.

The “underserved curse” in v.2 poses various problems. The Hebrew words are *qelalah*, meaning “vilification” and *chinnam*, meaning “devoid of cost, reason or advantage.” *The King James Version* reads this verse: “As the bird by wandering, as the swallow by flying, so the curse causeless shall not come.” To which *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The Authorized Version hardly gives the sense. The line should be rendered, *as the sparrow in (in respect of) its wandering, as the swallow in its flying*. The point of comparison is the vagueness and aimlessness of the birds’ flight, or the uselessness of trying to catch them in their course.” The Living Bible paraphrases: “An undeserved curse has no effect. Its intended victim will be no more harmed by it than by a sparrow or swallow flitting through the sky.” The question, however, is more about the curse than about the target. Jesus says: “Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”¹

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: “Balaam could not curse the people whom God had blessed (Deut 23:5). David was not hurt by Shimei’s curse (2 Sam 16:5-12); but was requited instead by God with good (Ps 109:28).” The fact that God offers Himself to us as a shield should give us enough assurance that curses that are put upon us will not harm us. The point of this proverb is, evidently, that undeserved curses do not hit the mark.

We note that the observation about the uselessness of curses is put in the context of the behavior of a fool. It is the *keciyl* who utters these curses. Jude’s words refer to them: “In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings. But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’ Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals — these are the very things that destroy them.”²

Some people might object to the inference in v.3 that a whip must be used on horses. The lesson is more in the comparison of a human being to an animal than in the means used for correction or training. James complains: “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”³ And David issues the warning: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.”⁴ To use a rod on the back of a human being robs him of his human dignity and reduces him to the level of an animal. Such is the fool.

1. Matt. 5:22

2. Jude 8-10

3. James 3:3,7,8

4. Ps. 32:8-10

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, says about the paradox in vv.4 and 5: “These twin sayings, which would have invited the charge of inconsistency had they not stood together (and did incur it, even so, from some Rabbis, who thereupon questioned the canonicity of the book), bring out the dilemma of those who would reason with the unreasonable. Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:11, and 11:16 leading up to it, where Paul found himself talking as a fool (cf. our verse 4b), yet knew that a refusal to use their terms would have confirmed his foolish flock in their opinions (cf. our verse 5b).”

The difference in approach, as expressed in both verses, is the difference between seriousness and mockery. To give a serious answer to a silly question invites an accusation of lacking of common sense. To give a silly answer to a silly question may reveal the silliness of the questioner.

V.6 seems a difficult verse to interpret because of the unusual choice of words. *Young’s Literal Translation* reads: “He is cutting off feet, he is drinking injury, Who is sending things by the hand of a fool.” The Living Bible paraphrases it: “To trust a rebel to convey a message is as foolish as cutting off your feet and drinking poison!” And Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, gives the milder reading: “You’re only asking for trouble when you send a message by a fool.” The problem word is the Hebrew *chamac*, which can mean “violence,” “wrong,” “damage,” “injustice” and so on. We find it in the verses: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of *violence*.”¹ “Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘You are responsible for the *wrong* I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.’”² “If a *malicious* witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time.”³ *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “To entrust an important commission to a fool is to deprive one’s self of the means of having it properly executed, and to bring upon one’s self shame and injury. A man who is so silly as to employ such an unfit messenger, as it were, cuts off the feet which should bear him on his errand, and, instead of enjoying the satisfaction of seeing the business well performed, he will be mortified and damaged by the blunder and stupidity of his emissary. Septuagint, ‘He makes for himself reproach from his own ways . . . who sends a word by a foolish messenger.’”

V.7 is connected to the previous proverb by the image of the lame legs. We if we take “proverb” to be the message to be conveyed in v.6 we read the two verses as poetical parallels. We could paraphrase it to read that the fool’s message does not have a leg to stand on. Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases this rather amusingly as: “A proverb quoted by fools is limp as a wet noodle.” We may draw the lesson from this comparison more easily if we turn it around and make it positive. The right word at the right place has a powerful effect. When proverbs turn into platitudes they not only miss the mark; they can be harmful. So does speaking an unwise word to a hurting person increase the hurt.

The comparison in v.8 points to the uselessness of honoring a fool. Stones must not be tied in slingshots because they are meant to be ejected. To tie it makes the weapon ineffective. The underlying idea is that those that receive honor are under obligation to do something with it. The fool only takes his laurels to rest upon them. When Jesus said: “My Father will honor the one who serves me”⁴ He, obviously, intended that the honor would add to the service.

V.9 provides an interesting parallel to the proverb in v.7. There the fool’s words hung limp, here they have an explosive effect that they were not meant to have. The picture is a vivid one. We can see the drunkard wildly waving the thorns, oblivious to the hurt he causes. Paul’s definition about prophecy could be applied to the correct use of a proverb: “Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening,

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1. Gen. 6:11
 2. Gen. 16:5
 3. Deut. 19:16,17
 4. John 12:26

encouragement and comfort.”¹ The gist of these verses is that wise words, which is what proverbs are, must be backed up by the wisdom of the speaker, otherwise they become corrupt and harmful.

When we look at the Hebrew text of v.10 in *The Interlinear Hebrew*, we see that it shows little or no resemblance to *The New International Version*'s rendering. The NIV reads: “Like an archer who wounds at random is he who hires a fool or any passer-by.” The Hebrew text: “The great God that formed all things rewards both the fool and rewards the transgressor.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states: “The text seems damaged beyond repair. Since several of the words have more than one meaning, numerous combinations have been tried, none of them self-authenticating. In line 1, *rab* may mean ‘archer,’ or ‘much’, or ‘great one’; and *m^chowleel*: ‘wounding’ or ‘bringing forth.’ Line 2 seems to mean that a fool and a casual laborer make equally poor employees (but RSV’s drunkard, from the Syriac, represents a more convincing way of vocalizing the consonants of the second *he that hireth*, as RV).”

As samples of various translations serve the following: “The great God who formed everything Gives the fool his hire and the transgressor his wages” (*New King James Version*). “Like an archer who wounds everybody is he who hires a passing fool or drunkard” (*Revised Standard Version*). “The master may get better work from an untrained apprentice than from a skilled rebel!” (*The Living Bible*). “An employer who hires a fool or a bystander is like an archer who shoots recklessly” (*New Living Translation*). Eugene H. Peterson tops it all with: “Hire a fool or a drunk and you shoot yourself in the foot.”

The proverb “As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly,” refers to a return to a sinful behavior from which one had been redeemed. The Apostle Peter applies it to the false teachers of his day.² Probably nothing defines the concept of folly as it is used in *The Book of Proverbs* better than the disgusting habit of dogs to eat their own vomit. If one consumes again that which is was a relief to get rid of, one asks for the pain that left to return. It is like a healed person to want back his sickness.

The self-evaluation in v.12 is not only imperfect, it is destructive. The Hebrew text reads literally: “See you a man wise in his own conceit? [there is more] hope of a fool than of him.” The Hebrew word *ayin*, “conceit,” is generally rendered “eye.” As such we find it in the verse: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”³ And in: “If I have found favor *in your eyes*, my lord, do not pass your servant by,”⁴ which is the way in which it is used in the verse before us. But we also find it in the verse: “The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a *spring* in the desert; it was the *spring* that is beside the road to Shur.”⁵

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs* comment: “The second line shows that his man is no dunce. While the fool pilloried in Proverbs is an opinionated creature (23:9), his stupidity may at least earn him a lesson (26:3). There is more, however, for an abler man’s vanity to feed on, and more damage than he can do (*cf.* 29:20). See I Corinthians 3:18; 8:2.” The verses referred to in *The Book of Proverbs* read respectively: “Do not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words,” “A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools!” and “Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” The two references in I Corinthians read: “Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise,” and “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.”

The question forces itself upon us how one can be more foolish than a fool. The answer is by using the wrong standards of comparison. The fool at least refrains from evaluating himself. The person who does his own evaluation and comes up with the wrong conclusion faces a hopeless future, a lost eternity. If we use our fellowmen as measurement for self-evaluation, we can pick and choose and we can always find someone

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1. I Cor. 14:3
 2. See 2 Peter, Chapter two.
 3. Gen. 3:5
 4. Gen. 18:3
 5. Gen. 16:7

who is less successful than we are. Thus we always come out smelling like a rose. If, as creatures created in the image of God, we compare ourselves with the original, with God's character, we will see the caricature we made. Better than doing our own evaluation is to ask God to do it for us. The Apostle Paul said: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."¹ He also said: "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world."² That attitude will provide for us the humility the Apostle prescribes in the words: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."³

6. Relationships with Sluggards 26:13-16

13 The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!"

14 As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed.

15 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.

16 The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, reflects on this section: "Admiration for the wit of this portraiture has to be tempered with disquiet, on reflection that the sluggard will be the last to see his own features here (see 16), for he has no idea that he is lazy: he is not a shirker but a 'realist' (13); not self-indulgent but 'below his best in the morning' (14); his inertia is 'an objection to being hustled' (15); his mental indolence a fine 'sticking to his guns' (16)."

The sluggard, Hebrew: *atsel*, belying his own nature, keeps on popping up in *The Book of Proverbs*. The sluggard's excuse in v.13 is the same as what we saw in an earlier proverb: "The sluggard says, 'There is a lion outside!' or, 'I will be murdered in the streets!'"⁴ *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that the Hebrew uses two different words for "lion." The first one is *shachal*, which *The King James Version* consistently calls "fierce lion" in *The Book of Job*.⁵ The Psalmist uses the word as an image of Satan in the verse: "You will tread upon the lion and the cobra..."⁶ The second word is *'ariy*, which means "young lion." It is the kind of animal Samson and David killed.⁷ Evidently, the sluggard does not consider himself to be a Samson or a David.

The comparison of the sluggard turning on his bed with a door turning on its hinges is not devoid of humor. Sleep is one of God's gifts to His creatures. David recognized this when he wrote: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety."⁸ And King Solomon says in one of his psalms: "[God] grants sleep to those he loves."⁹ But he also issues a warning to the lazy not to overstay their welcome in bed. "How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?"¹⁰

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1. I Cor. 4:3,4
 2. I Cor. 11:31,32
 3. Phil. 2:3
 4. Prov. 22:13
 5. See Job 4:10; 10:16; 28:8.
 6. Ps. 91:13
 7. See Judg. 14:5,8,9,18 and I Sam. 34:34,36,37.
 8. Ps. 4:8
 9. Ps. 127:2
 10. Prov. 6:9

The Pulpit Commentary comments here: “The door moves on its hinges and makes no progress beyond its own confined sphere of motion; so the slothful man turns himself on his bed from side to side, but never leaves it to do his work. Other analogies have been found in this proverb. Thus: The door opens to let the diligent go forth to his daily business, while the sluggard is rolling upon his bed; the door creaks when it is moved, so the lazy man groans when he is aroused; the door now is opened, now is shut, so the sluggard at one time intends to rise, and then falls back in his bed, and returns to his sleep.”

V.15 is the younger twin brother of another proverb: “The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth!”¹ As the bed is for sleep so food is for the body. The sluggard misuses both, the one by overindulgence, the other by “under-indulgence.” If the food is there and is ready to be eaten, the one who does not avail himself of the opportunity to satisfy his legitimate needs is more than a sluggard; he is a fool. Moses teaches us: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”² If the sluggard is too lazy to eat his bread, he will not feed his soul either.

V.16 portrays the apex of self-indulgence in the matter of self-evaluation. Earlier in *The Book of Proverbs* the father admonished his son: “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.”³ The only yardstick we are allowed to use on ourselves is the character of God. If we use ourselves as a measuring stick, our conclusion will be worthless. If we are wise in our own eyes we have no idea who the One is we must fear and we will end up in the sphere of influence of the enemy.

7. Relationships with Gossips 26:17-28

17 Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own.

Dogs in Middle East society were not house pets. The mere touch would make a Jewish believer impure. We must see the picture that is drawn here in that light otherwise we will miss the lesson. Incidentally, I once tried to separate two fighting dogs by pulling their heads apart and I got bitten in my hand. I found out that the way to proceed is grabbing their tails. Interestingly, *The Septuagint*, reads: “As he who lays hold of a dog’s tail, so is he who sets himself forth as champion in another’s cause.” Maybe these Greek translators of the Old Testament never tried to separate fighting dogs, or maybe they did and learned the same lesson I learned. Seizing a dog’s ears is the equivalent of getting involved in a squabble in which we have no business meddling.

This whole section fits under the heading of gossip. We must not lend ourselves to become talebearers of unfounded or harmful pieces of information. We will get hurt in the process.

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1. Prov. 19:24
 2. Deut. 8:3
 3. Prov. 3:7

18,19 Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, "I was only joking!"

The breaking up of this proverb into two verses is ample proof of the fact that inserting chapters and verses in the Bible is not part of divine inspiration.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, gives us the interesting paraphrase: "People who shrug off deliberate deceptions, saying, 'I didn't mean it, I was only joking,' are worse than careless campers who walk away from smoldering campfires."

The Hebrew word, translated "joking" is *sachaq*, which means "to laugh." *The King James Version* reads: "As a mad man who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death, So is the man that deceiveth his neighbor, and saith, Am not I in sport?" The word "sport" has obviously acquired a different meaning in modern English.

We can look at the lesson of these verses in two ways. The serious consideration is that deception fits the same category as murder. It would be like pointing a loaded gun at someone, pull the trigger and say: "I didn't know it was loaded." One does not shoot his neighbor or himself for fun. One does not play "Russian roulette" either with oneself or with someone else. It would be playing with fire in the literal sense of the word.

Another way to look at these verses is from the standpoint of humor. God has endowed some people with a sense of humor. Humor can lighten life's burdens, but it can also be used as a mask to hide painful emotions and to escape reality. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines humor as: "A quality that appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or incongruous; a keen perception of the ludicrous or incongruous." The Apostle Paul may have had the use of humor in mind when he advised the Colossians: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."¹

20 Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.

21 As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.

22 The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts.

23 Like a coating of glaze over earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart.

24 A malicious man disguises himself with his lips, but in his heart he harbors deceit.

25 Though his speech is charming, do not believe him, for seven abominations fill his heart.

26 His malice may be concealed by deception, but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.

27 If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.

28 A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

These nine proverbs give us a penetrating analysis of gossip and slander. V.20 warns us against adding to the fire of gossip, v.21 against starting the fire. V.22 reveals our sinful tendency to enjoy hearing gossip, and v.23 our clever way of covering up that joy and looking respectable. V.25 warns us not to believe gossip and vv.26 and 27 look at the Day of Judgment. V.28 points to the one who is behind all gossip: the father of lies, the murderer of men.

V.22 is a repeat of a previous proverb.² *The New King James Version* reads v.23, "Fervent lips with a wicked heart are like earthenware covered with silver dross." A more modern reading of the vowels in the Hebrew words leads to the reading "like glaze."

The Hebrew word for "gossip" is *nirgan* which literally means "to roll to pieces." The word is only found in the Bible in *The Book of Proverbs*, and it always refers to the person who gossips, not to what he says. It is important to note this because it points to the sickness that must be treated instead of the symptoms. We are reminded of Jesus' words: "The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart,

1. Col. 4:6

2. See Prov. 18:8.

and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, *slander*.”¹ This fact explains the statement in v.22 that some people find listening to gossip is so enjoyable. Mankind enjoys evil to its own shame and condemnation. That is why TV programs about crime are so popular. I remember the words of a preacher who said that we look at a murder being committed on the screen and we say: “That was relaxing.”

The question that ought to preoccupy us is what is the difference between gossip and a lie? As with all lies, there is an element of truth in all tale bearing. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “gossip” as a “rumor or report of an intimate nature,” and “slander” as “a false report maliciously uttered and tending to injure the reputation of a person.” It is clear, though, that the dividing line between the two is very thin.

It is important that, since gossip originates in man’s sinful nature, its original source is satanic. James traced the source correctly when he said: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”²

Since gossip is fed by hatred, the antidote is love. If we love the Lord, our God, with all our heart, mind and will, and our neighbor as ourselves, we will not talk about our neighbor, nor enjoy hearing ill report about him or her.

B. Proverbs Regulating Various Activities 27:1—29:27

1. Chapter 27:1-27

1 Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.

The Hebrew word, rendered “to boast” is *halal*, which means “to shine,” or “to praise.” It is part in the word “halleluiah.” It is the same word that is used in the following verse. Obviously, the topic here is not the day of tomorrow but the plans a person has for that day. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes about this: “James 4:13-16 enlarges on this, and Matthew 6:34 (19-34) on the companion sin of worry. Both are rectified by an embracing of the present will of God: cf. Psalm 37:3.” The quotation from James reads: “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.” In the verse from Matthew Jesus says: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” And David advises in Ps. 37: “Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.”

In boasting about tomorrow, man boasts about himself, thinking that he controls the future. When God created time and placed us as human beings within its framework, He purposely kept tomorrow hidden from us. Except for some rare instances of prophetic insight, nobody knows for sure what the future holds. God obviously did this so that we would put our trust in Him. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”³ Jeremiah elaborated on the theme with: “ ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice

1. Matt. 15:18,19

2. James 3:6

3. I Cor. 1:31

and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the LORD."¹ We do not know the future, but we know Him who holds the future.

2 Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips.

Whereas v.1 looks to tomorrow, v.2 looks to yesterday. The person who praises himself boasts about his accomplishments. Now, there is no reason why we would not be proud of our work if it is well done. This proverb does not suggest that we must downplay the value of what we do. When God looked at His creation He pronounced it "good" and "very good."² Being created in the image and likeness of God allows us to find satisfaction in what we do. But we must also recognize that there is in this a difference between God and us. It is because of the image and likeness of God in us that we can produce works that have eternal value. That means that God gives us the ability; it is not the fruit of our own endeavor. Speaking about this topic, the Apostle Paul asks himself the question: "And who is equal to such a task?" He answers this: "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God."³ So that we would keep our accomplishments in the right perspective, Jesus says: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"⁴ But Jesus also said in *The Parable of the Talents*: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"⁵ If we knew that our own boast could make us lose that ultimate praise from God, it would help us to keep ourselves well within the limits of bragging about our achievements.

3 Stone is heavy and sand a burden, but provocation by a fool is heavier than both.

4 Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?

These two proverbs are linked together by their weight. They both express a burden too heavy to carry. In v.3 it is the character of the fool that makes his outburst so difficult to endure. V.4 looks at the cause of the flare-up of emotions. The Hebrew word, rendered "provocation" is *ka`ac*, which can also be translated: "anger," or "grief." The word occurs four times in *The Book of Proverbs*. The three other times are in the verses: "A fool shows his *annoyance* at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult,"⁶ "A foolish son brings *grief* to his father and bitterness to the one who bore him"⁷ and "Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and *ill-tempered* wife."⁸ It is difficult to determine how *ka`ac* ought to be translated. Job used the same images to express his suffering. We read: "If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas — no wonder my words have been impetuous."⁹

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1. Jer. 9:24
 2. See Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31.
 3. See II Cor. 2:16; 3:5.
 4. Luke 17:10
 5. Matt. 25:21
 6. Prov. 12:16
 7. Prov. 17:25
 8. Prov. 21:19
 9. Job 6:2,3

Anger can be a reasonable reaction to certain conditions. When Jesus saw the corruption in the temple, His anger flared up and He chased the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple court.¹ The fact that it is the fool who becomes angry, meaning that the emotion is not warranted by circumstances, is what makes it hard to endure. The heaviest of all is the anger that is spawned by jealousy. Jealousy always consists within the framework of love. When love is not answered or not met by devotion, jealousy raises its head. God calls Himself jealous. He said to the Israelites: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.”² These verses make most sense if we see that human anger can reflect divine wrath. The manifestation of God’s anger will be the heaviest mankind will ever see. On the world’s last day, people will try to flee God’s anger without being told to do so. We read: “Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’ ” And: “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.”³

5 Better is open rebuke than hidden love.

6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

V.5 places rebuke in the framework of love. It suggests that criticism can be appropriate if it is driven by love for the person we criticize. The Apostle Paul considered this attitude to be of the greatest importance for the proper functioning of the body of Christ. To the Ephesians he wrote: “Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”⁴ The “hidden love” is here that love that does not speak up for fear of hurting someone’s feelings. True friendship is frank. But there is also love that covers up. As the Apostle Paul states in his Ode to Love: “It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”⁵ But that does not mean that we ought to hide flaws from the person we love. We will not reveal them to others.

The Pulpit Commentary quotes the Dutchman Erasmus who wrote: “If you take no notice of your friend’s faults, they will be imputed to you.” And the Roman Cicero who said: “When a man’s ears are shut against the truth, so that he cannot hear the truth from a friend, the welfare of such a one is hopeless. Shrewd is the observation of Cato, that some are better served by bitter enemies than by friends who seem to be agreeable; for the former often speak the truth, the latter never.... As therefore both to give and receive advice is the characteristic of true friendship, and that the one should act with freedom, but not harshly, and that the other should accept remonstrance patiently and without resistance, so it should be considered that there is no deadlier bane to friendship than adulation, fawning, and flattery.”

The Hebrew text of v.6 reads literally: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.” The Hebrew word, rendered “faithful” is *‘aman*, which means: “to build up or support.” It may be best illustrated in the lancing of a boil; however painful the procedure, the goal is to heal.

7 He who is full loathes honey, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet.

1. See Matt. 21:12-16; Mark 11:15,16; John 2:13-17.
2. Ex. 20:5
3. Rev. 6:15-17; 20:11,12
4. Eph. 4:15
5. I Cor. 13:5-7

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, makes the profound observation: “This is not a truism about food, but a parable about possessions. It bears on (among other things) the disposition we acquire by the level of comfort we choose. A bilious outlook is a poor prize.” The word “loathe” in this verse seems to overstate the issue. Incidentally, this is the only verse in which it occurs in *The Book of Proverbs*. The Hebrew word is *buwc*, which literally means: “to trample.” We find it in the verse “Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we *trample* our foes.”¹

The first implication of the truth expressed in this proverb is that affluence makes wasteful. Honey does no longer symbolize delicacy as it did in biblical times, but that is not the point. Too much of a good thing does not make the item bad, but it spoils the user. Dr. A. W. Tozer once told his friends that there was nothing wrong with them that a good economic crisis could not cure. He may have said this “tongue-in-cheek,” but that does not change the truth that there can be a curse in abundance and a blessing in shortage. Moses’ words: “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”² indicate that God uses hardships in our life to make us look beyond the visible to the real values in life. We will suffer spiritually unless there is in our heart a genuine hunger and thirst for fellowship with God.

8 Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home.

9 Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one’s friend springs from his earnest counsel.

10 Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father, and do not go to your brother’s house when disaster strikes you — better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away.

The theme that ties these verses together is the home, the birthplace, the place of comfort and familiarity. To the Jews home was the Promised Land, the place God had given to them as inheritance. That thought adds a special spiritual emphasis to this verse. It is not merely that a person who travels becomes homesick, but he is removed from the place where God revealed Himself. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, *The Septuagint* reads: “As when a bird flies down from its own nest, so is a man brought into bondage when he is banished ... from his own place.”

David expressed this thought in one of his psalms: “My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon — from Mount Mizar.”³

If we consider v.8 to contain the spiritual implication of leaving one’s home, the place God has chosen to reveal Himself, then the next verse links fellowship with God to fellowship with one another. Real friends are those who know the same God we know and who enjoy the same relationship with their Savior. The Old Testament believer saw this experience symbolized by perfume. Although the use of perfume is still widespread, its function may have changed throughout the ages. For people who bathe and shower regularly, perfume is not the essential article it used to be. In Old Testament times in hot and arid countries perfume was used to cover a multitude of unpleasant odors. Graham Greene, in one of his novels, sarcastically describes a person as “someone who keeps his friends because he uses the right kind of deodorant.”

It is difficult to define odor. It is also difficult to control it, even with the use of artificial means. The Apostle Paul spiritualizes this by saying: “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of

1. Ps. 44:5
2. Deut. 8:3
3. Ps. 42:6

life.”¹ To spread the aroma of Christ is a clearer testimony to our fellowship with God than any words we speak. That may be the particular pleasantness of a friend’s earnest counsel this proverb speaks about.

The advice in v.10 is problematic because it can be taken in different directions. In the first part of the sentence the word “forsake” seems to indicate that the friend is the one in need and we are called upon to be the helper. In the second part, we are the ones who need help, which we do not find where we expected it to be. This seems to contradict an earlier proverb that stated: “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”² On the other hand we read earlier: “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”³ It also seems to contradict the previous proverb about the dangers of leaving one’s home.

This is further complicated by the apparent distance between the house of the brother and that of the neighbor. And distance here can be taken to mean physical, emotional or spiritual distance. By definition, a neighbor is the person who lives next-door. A brother is a next-of-kin who can live under the same roof or miles away. Jesus makes the distance to the neighbor a spiritual one in *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*.⁴ At the end of the story, when Jesus asks the question: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” and the lawyer replies, “The one who had mercy on him,” Jesus tells him, “Go and do likewise.” Jesus said to this man, who was a Jew, “Be a neighbor to a Samaritan.”

The law states that we must love our neighbor as ourselves.⁵ There is no commandment that states that we must love our brother; that love is implied in the bond of family. Love among brothers is praised in Scripture, as in the Psalm: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”⁶ This suggests that the love that comes from the bonds of blood is different from the one that ties us to people to whom we are not directly related. If we call the first natural, the other is supernatural. Jesus connected the commandment to love our neighbor to the commandment to love God. He said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”⁷ We may conclude from this that the love of God and of our neighbor are of the same kind.

In another parable, Jesus suggests that if we treat other people as neighbors, we will receive their help in times of need. Jesus made this point in the negative in *The Parable of the Dishonest Manager*.⁸ In the conclusion of that parable Jesus says: “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” The main lesson from v.10 can be condensed in the words: “Do not forsake a friend and you will not be forsaken.”

11 Be wise, my son, and bring joy to my heart; then I can answer anyone who treats me with contempt.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, points to the New Testament application the Apostle Paul makes of this proverb in First Thessalonians: “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the

1. II Cor. 2:15,16
2. Prov. 17:17
3. Prov. 18:24
4. See Luke 10:30-37.
5. Lev. 19:18b
6. Ps. 133:1
7. Matt. 22:37-40
8. See Luke 16:1-9.

presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.” And: “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.”¹

The Old Testament setting in which we find this proverb raises some serious questions. Can a father demand good behavior from his son, merely for the purpose of proving himself to be a good educator? Are our children called upon to defend us when we are under attack? The problem is that the wisdom the father wants his son to demonstrate is not inheritable. As parents we can model the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom, but we cannot transmit it to our children. I know godly parents whose children have gone astray. It would be unfair to blame the parents for the sins of the children. We cannot take credit either, as parents, if our children turn out well and follow the Lord.

In the Old Testament, as love became a command, it seems that the fear of the Lord was also considered to be a spiritual heritage which a father was commanded to pass on to his children. So we read that God said to Himself: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”² And a son who refused that heritage endangered his own life.³ It is true that one of the requirements for being an elder in the church is to be a successful educator of one’s children. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?).”⁴

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “If the pupil did not show wisdom and morality in his conduct, the teacher would incur blame for the apparent failure of his education; whereas the high tone of the disciple might be appealed to as a proof of the merit and efficacy of the tutor’s discipline. On the other hand, the evil doings of Hebrews often made the Name of God to be blasphemed among the Gentiles; just as nowadays the inconsistent lives of Christians are the greatest impediment to the success of missionary efforts in heathen countries.”

12 The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

13 Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger; hold it in pledge if he does it for a wayward woman.

These two proverbs are identical to the ones we saw earlier in chapters 22:3 and 20:16.

14 If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse.

15 A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day;

16 restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand.

The theme that links these proverbs together is an obnoxious attitude in the male or female. The first proverb suggests that one must not disturb people too early in the morning. For some of us it takes time to wake up and some people resent to be woken up prematurely. People who have lived in Muslim countries and heard the call to prayer issued from the mosque at 4 o’clock in the morning may want to apply v.14 to that situation.

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1. I Thess 2:19,20:3:8
 2. Gen. 18:17-19
 3. See Deut. 21:18-21.
 4. I Tim. 3:4,5

Admittedly, the saying is not without its humor! There is not only a proper way to bless people, there is also a proper time of day. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The ‘loud voice’ intimates the importunate nature of such public trumpeting of gratitude, as the ‘rising early’ denotes its inopportune and tactless insistency, which cannot wait for a convenient opportunity for its due expression. It shall be counted a curse to him. The receiver of this sordid adulation, and indeed all the bystanders, would just as soon be cursed by the parasite as blessed in this offensive manner. This clamorous outpouring of gratitude is not accepted as a return by the benefactor; he sees the mean motives by which it is dictated self-interest, hope of future benefits — and he holds it as cheap as he would the curses of such a person.” Derek Kinder, in *Proverbs*, adds to this: “It matters not only *what* we say, but *how*, *when* and *why* we say it.”

The principle of “what, how and when” is important in our efforts to witness to people who do not believe in Jesus Christ. It is true that Paul advised Timothy to preach “in season and out of season,”¹ but that does not necessarily apply to this situation. Some buttonholing in evangelism scares people away from the Lord instead of attracting them. There is wisdom in “friendship evangelism,” that is building up a friendly relationship with someone before introducing him or her to Christ.

We were earlier introduced to the nagging wife in a broader family setting: “A foolish son is his father’s ruin, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping.”² The Hebrew text reads literally: “A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike. Whoever hides her hides the wind, and the ointment of his right hand which betrays itself.” This is the only place in the Old Testament where the Hebrew word *cagriyd*, “pouring rain” occurs. Whether this means that the nagging wife is also an extremely rare phenomenon is a subject we will not discuss here. We may repeat what we stated earlier in connection with the same subject: The nagging wife may be a source of irritation; the alcoholic husband often means total ruin. Families in which all the children turn out well are exceptional. Only the place where the Lord is head of the home is a nest in which children grow up in an environment of love and care.

17 As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

18 He who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who looks after his master will be honored.

The Hebrew text of v.17 reads literally: “Iron sharpens iron, so sharpens the countenance of his friend.” The Hebrew word *paniyim* has a variety of meanings. It can be rendered “face,” as in “The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his *face* was downcast.”³ But the same word is also found in “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering *over* the waters.”⁴ In the proverb before us it probably means “character.” The nineteenth century German poet Goethe says: “A talent is nourished in quietness but a character in the currents of the world.”

The proverb seems to praise abrasiveness. After all, sharpening is done by friction. It seems to say that there is virtue in rubbing people the wrong way, or being rubbed. Most Bible scholars interpret the saying positively, in the sense that human interaction builds up. *Barnes’ Notes*, for instance, states: “The proverb expresses the gain of mutual counsel as found in clear, well-defined thoughts. Two minds, thus acting on each other, become more acute. This is better than to see in ‘sharpening’ the idea of provoking, and the point of the maxim in the fact that the quarrels of those who have been friends are bitter in proportion to their previous intimacy.” The most positive interpretation will be found if we look upon it from the perspective of the one being sharpened instead of the one who does the sharpening. Our neighbor’s

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1. See II Tim 4:2.
 2. Prov. 19:13
 3. Gen. 4:4b,5
 4. Gen. 1:2

idiosyncrasies may provoke negative reactions in us, which must be confessed and overcome. Thus the Lord can use other people's shortcomings to reveal our own and promote our sanctification. We must not hang on to our own rough edges for the benefit of others. We can welcome the abrasiveness of others as it draws us closer to God.

V.18 draws our attention to how we ought to see our role in cultivating relationships. It is like tending a tree, a fig tree. We must look upon our human relationships as something that will "bear fruit." This proverb approaches the same topic from quite a different angle than the previous one. There is nothing sharp in this picture. If the previous proverbs spoke of enduring being handled roughly, this one suggests that we treat our neighbor with loving concern. The fig tree was Israel's national tree. We may see the image as depicting fellowship with other believers in Christ. There is also, more pertinently, a reference to our service to Christ as our Master. Maybe this proverb throws a different light upon Jesus' encounter with Nathanael. We read: "When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, 'Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.' 'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Then Nathanael declared, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.' Jesus said, 'You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that. He then added, 'I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"¹ If we would concentrate more on tending our Master's fig tree than upon honing other people's sharp edges, the church would be a better place, and, eventually, so would the world.

19 As water reflects a face, so a man's heart reflects the man.

20 Death and Destruction are never satisfied, and neither are the eyes of man.

21 The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives.

22 Though you grind a fool in a mortar, grinding him like grain with a pestle, you will not remove his folly from him.

These four verses have the theme of the human character in common. The Hebrew text of v.19 is rather cryptic: "As in water face [answers] to face, so the heart of man to man. The Living Bible gives a different twist to this with: "A mirror reflects a man's face, but what he is really like is shown by the kind of friends he chooses." Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, captures the sense probably better with the paraphrase: "Just as water mirrors your face, so your face mirrors your heart." After all, the human heart is the least visible part of man's personality; the eyes are supposed to be the mirror of the soul.

Bible scholars differ about the interpretation of v.19. Some take it to mean that we can judge others by looking at ourselves. Others believe that it speaks about self-knowledge.

An anecdote about Abraham Lincoln states that Lincoln once rejected a person's application for a certain job because he said he did not like his face. When one of the president's aides remarked that the man could not be held responsible for the face he had, Lincoln answered: "Everyone over forty is responsible for the face he has."

Whether self-knowledge or looking at one's neighbor, the truth remains that the human heart is basically corrupt. *Geneva Notes* comments: "There is no difference between men by nature, only the grace of God makes the difference." Self-knowledge makes us look upon one another with suspicion. In a way, it is a good thing that we do not know our neighbor too well. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* quotes a line from the poet Herbert: "Surely, if each man saw another's heart there would be no commerce; all would disperse, and live apart."

Speaking about mirrors, James tells us how to use them to our benefit: "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law

1. John 1:47-51

that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.”¹

That brings us to v.20. A footnote in *The New International Version* states that the Hebrew words for “death and destruction” are *Sheol* and *Abaddon*. *Sheol* is the general term for the realm of death without specifying its character. *Abaddon* is the place of the lost. The word *Abaddon* is also found in an earlier proverb we saw: “Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD — how much more the hearts of men!”² In that proverb the human heart is also mentioned in the same breath with corruption. Jeremiah prophesied about the human heart: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? ‘I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.’”³ The Apostle John shows us the way out of the predicament with: “This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”⁴

The Hebrew text of v.21 reads literally: “[As] the refining pot for silver, and the furnace for gold; so is a man to his praise. The conciseness of the text has led to various interpretations. Some Bible scholars see “praise” as the boasting the person does about himself; others believe that it speaks about how a person reacts to public opinion. An earlier proverb stated the same truth in slightly different wording: “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart.”⁵ Putting the two together gives us to understand that God allows some praise in our lives in order to see how we handle it. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “As silver and gold are tried by the art of the refiner, so is a man’s heart by the praise he receives. If he feel it not, he deserves it; if he be pulled up by it, he is worthless.”

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, *The Septuagint* reads, “The action of fire is a test for silver and gold, so a man is tested by the mouth of them that praise him.” *The Commentary* continues: “No surer test of a man’s true character can be found than his behavior under praise; many men are spoiled by it. If a man comes forth from it without injury, not rendered vain, or blind to his defects, or disdainful of others, his disposition is good, and the commendation lavished upon him may be morally and spiritually beneficial.”

It is true that praise can be more dangerous to us than negative criticism. The proverb “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses”⁶ suggested this. When we recognize our mistakes and shortcomings, we draw closer to the Lord, but when we believe we have done well, we tend to take the credit for ourselves. The only praise that counts is that which comes from God. Jesus said to His contemporaries: “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”⁷ We are really doing well if, instead of praising us, people around us will praise God for what we do. As Jesus says in *The Sermon on the Mount*: “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”⁸

V.22 suggests that reacting to praise by fellow humans by getting a big head makes us a fool. The crucible and the mortar are identical. The difference is that the crucible may bring out the right stuff but the mortar does not. When David confessed the horrible sins he had committed in his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, he said: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”⁹ It is our refusal to be broken that makes us into fools.

1. James 1:23-25
2. Prov. 15:11
3. Jer. 17:9,10
4. I John 3:19,20
5. Prov. 17:3
6. See Prov. 27:6.
7. John 5:44
8. Matt. 5:16

**23 Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds;
 24 for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations.
 25 When the hay is removed and new growth appears and the grass from the hills is gathered in,
 26 the lambs will provide you with clothing, and the goats with the price of a field.
 27 You will have plenty of goats' milk to feed you and your family and to nourish your servant girls.**

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, calls these verses a “Pastoral Symphony”; he comments: “This country scene is not designed to make farmers of everybody, but to show the proper interplay of man’s labor and God’s nurture, which a sophisticated society neglects at its peril. It recalls the reader from the scramble for money and position (24) to the satisfaction of doing a worth-while job well (23), and to a recognition of the rhythm (25) and sufficiency (26,27) of God’s care.”

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The moralist evidently desires to recall his countrymen from the luxury of cities and the temptations of money making to the simple ways of the patriarchs and the pleasures of country pursuits — which are the best foundation of enduring prosperity.” I am not sure these verses really speak about a return to nature or even about taking an inventory of our earthly possession. They rather seem to emphasize the uncertainty and fleeting character of riches. The speaker does not even speak about the security of the life of the owner of the flock but also about his children and grandchildren: “all generations.” The “crown” makes the owner a king, the head of a royal dynasty. There is no guarantee that the royal family will keep the throne forever and ever.

We may even detect a note of irony in these admonitions. It is as if the author of these proverbs says: “Count your sheep. How secure does that make you feel?” “Have you stacked up enough to leave it to your children?” A glance at the various interpretations Bible commentators have produced reveals that these simple idyllic looking verses may not be saying what they appear to say to us. Instead of praising agriculture and describing peace and security, they may point to the insecurity of human possessions and the human tendency to lean on false premises for security. These verses may sound more a trumpet blast of warning than a flute solo of a shepherd. Israel being an agricultural society with a main emphasis on sheep and herds would be lured into a sense of false security by peaceful pictures like these. We may get closer to the author’s intent if we place these verses next to the admonition in Hebrews: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”¹

2. Chapter 28:1-28

1 The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.

This verse establishes the relationship between courage and a good conscience on the one hand and the results of a bad conscience on the other. *The King James Versions* reads v.1 – “The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion.” A funny Englishman I knew changed the spelling and punctuation of this verse, making it read: “The wicked flea, when no man pursueth but the righteous, is as bold as a lion.” But wickedness and fear are no laughing matters. Predicting Israel’s captivity as a result of their disobedience, God said to them through Moses: “As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight.”²

9. Ps. 51:17
1. Heb. 13:5,6
2. Lev. 26:36

The Pulpit Commentary quotes Chrysostom on the subject, who said: “Such is the nature of sin, that it betrays while no one finds fault; it condemns whilst no one accuses; it makes the sinner a timid being, one that trembles at a sound; even as righteousness has the contrary effect. How doth the wicked flee when no man pursueth? He hath that within which drives him on, an accuser in his own conscience, and this he carries about everywhere; and just as it would be impossible to flee from himself, so neither can he escape the persecutor within, but wherever he goeth he is scourged, and hath an incurable wound.” It is the accusation of our own heart that makes us fearful, first of all in our relationship with God and consequently in human society.

The immediate result of sin is a feeling of shame and fear. After he sinned Adam said to God: “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”¹ It was an uneasy conscience that made Francis Thompson write the poem *The Hound of Heaven*: “I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years ... But with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they beat — and a Voice beat more instant than the Feet — ‘All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.’ ” When the love of God has washed our hearts from fear, we will find ourselves able to face the threat of human society in which people are out to kill each other.

The keyword in every encounter with God is: “Do not fear!” God said to Abraham: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”² Joshua and Caleb said to the people who were afraid to enter Canaan: “If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”³ God said to Jeremiah: “But the LORD said to me, ‘Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ ‘You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,’ declares the LORD.”⁴ To Ezekiel He said: “And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house.”⁵ The angel said to the shepherds: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”⁶ And to John He said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”⁷

Obedience to God provides us with strength to face life. The Lion of Judah shares His victory with those who acknowledge Him as their Master.

2 When a country is rebellious, it has many rulers, but a man of understanding and knowledge maintains order.

3 A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops.

4 Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law resist them.

5 Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it fully.

These four verses portray the results of rebellion against God. If we refuse to recognize God’s authority, we will have problems with human authority also. We understand from the destruction of Sodom

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1. Gen. 3:10
 2. Gen. 15:1
 3. Num. 14:8,9
 4. Jer. 1:7,8
 5. Ezek. 2:6
 6. Luke 2:10,11
 7. Rev. 1:17,18

and Gomorrah that ten righteous people could have saved the cities. As a matter of fact, even the presence of one righteous person made it impossible for the angels to carry out their mission of destruction. We read that the angel said to Lot: “I cannot do anything until you reach [Zoar].”¹ V.2 explains that it is the sin of rebellion against authority that causes a country to have “more chiefs than Indians.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on this verse: “In just over two centuries, northern Israel, for its sins, had nine dynasties, each, after the first, inaugurated by an assassination ... In three and a half centuries, Judah, for David’s sake, had only one.”

The verse does not necessarily condemn democracy, government by the people. The mention of the “man of understanding” does not advocate dictatorship either. The one man may be the one God looks for to stand in the gap. We read in Ezekiel that God said: “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.”² The prayer of one person can save a country from perdition. Amos was such a person. It was his intercession that postponed the captivity of the Northern Kingdom for several years. We read: “This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king’s share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up. When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, ‘Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!’ So the LORD relented. ‘This will not happen,’ the LORD said. This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: The Sovereign LORD was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. Then I cried out, ‘Sovereign LORD, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!’ So the LORD relented.”³ If we love the Lord and we love our country, we will intercede as Amos did.

V.3 illustrates corruption of power. We are reminded of Lord Acton’s dictum: “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” World history is filled with examples of monarch, presidents and dictators who bled their country by enriching themselves. The Hebrew text reads literally: “A poor man that oppresses the poor is like a sweeping rain that leaves no food.” The two words rendered “poor” are not the same. The first is *ruwsh*, which means: “to be destitute,” the second is *dal*, which literally means: “dangling.” The latter may refer more to one’s position in life rather than the lacking of means. *The Pulpit Commentary* describes *ruwsh* as “the needy” and *dal* as “the feeble.” *The Commentary* states: “The gnome refers to a usurper who, rising to power from poor estate, makes the very worst and most tyrannical ruler. Such a one has learned nothing from his former condition but callous indifference, and now seeks to exercise on others that power which once galled him. Thus among schoolboys it is found that the greatest bully is one who has himself been bullied.”

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on v.4: “Without revelation, all is soon relative; and with moral relativity, nothing quite merits attack. So, *e.g.*, the tyrant is accepted because he gets things done; and the pervert, because his condition is interesting.”

The key to v.4 is in v.5. Justice is an absolute because it is derived from the character of God. If we leave God out of the picture, we destroy the basis of morals and we land in the realm of “situational ethics.” We can only distinguish between right and wrong in reference to God’s absolute standards. If we seek God, we will understand what is right or wrong. The practice of wickedness and praise of the wicked can always be traced back to a lack of understanding who God is. Satan has very successfully blurred the image of God and kept God out of the courtroom. Even though a witness in a legal process swears to tell the truth by invoking the Name of God, any link between God and justice is denied. The devil knows the law and manipulates it effectively. Jesus explained the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the application of justice, when He said to His disciples: “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness,

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1. Gen. 19:22
 2. Ezek. 22:30
 3. Amos 7:1-6

because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.”¹

6 Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse.

This proverb is practically identical to the one we saw earlier: “Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a fool whose lips are perverse.”² Generally speaking, the infrastructure of society is based on the principle that godliness does not pay. A strict adherence to ethical behavior does not bring in money. Some people enrich themselves by presenting a righteous front for the purpose of collecting money. But that cannot be classified as moral behavior. Speaking about the false teacher, the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy: “He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”³

This proverb does not praise poverty, nor does it state that riches are evil. The comparison is between being blameless and being perverse. God makes some people rich and some He does not. It is the riches we seek outside God that makes us a prey of evil.

7 He who keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father.

By laying the connection between the son’s understanding of the law and the father’s approval, the author places the whole matter against the background of wisdom, which is the theme of the whole book. This verse is a condensation of the theme that was elaborated on in Chapter Twenty-three.⁴ The Living Bible renders the verse: “Young men who are wise obey the law; a son who is a member of a lawless gang is a shame to his father.” The word “gluttons” may give us the wrong impression as if the verse focuses particularly on overeating. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Whoso keeps the law is a wise son: but he who keeps the company of riotous men shames his father.” The Hebrew word, rendered “gluttons” in *The New International Version* is *zalal*, which literally means “to shake in the wind,” or “to be loose morally.” We find it in the verse about the rebellious son about whom the parents say to the elders of Israel: “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a *profligate* and a drunkard.”⁵

The picture of the father who is ashamed of his son’s behavior is offset by the father in Jesus’ *Parable of the Prodigal*, who embraces his wayward son when he returns, saying: “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”⁶

8 He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.

Eugene Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases this verse: “Get as rich as you want through cheating and extortion, but eventually some friend of the poor is going to give it all back to them.” The law forbade any charging of interest to fellow Israelites. We read: “Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother

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1. John 16:8-11
 2. Prov. 19:1
 3. I Tim. 6:4-8
 4. See Prov. 23:19-25.
 5. Deut. 21:20
 6. Luke 15:24

Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.”¹ Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “The process, if usually slow, is as sure as the promise, ‘The meek shall inherit the earth’ ... the Mosaic law shows that the legitimacy of it depends on its context: what was quite proper in terms of economics (Dt. 23:20) was pronounced improper in terms of family care (Dt. 23:19) – as if a doctor should charge for treating his own children.” If charging of interest was forbidden among Israelites but permitted in relation to foreigners, charging of “exorbitant interest” points into the direction of foreign relations. This proverb may speak more about the spiritual testimony Israel was supposed to have as a kingdom of priests than about the role they play in the world of finances. In God’s plan of salvation, Israel was supposed to share its spiritual wealth with the world. “Salvation is from the Jews.”² But as Israel failed to share the wealth, they lost what they had.

9 If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable.

This proverb establishes the relationship between obedience and answered prayer. The Hebrew text reads literally: “He who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.” The Hebrew word for “hearing” is *shama*, which means: “to hear intelligently.” It implies that hearing is akin to obeying. The verses in Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”³ are known as “The Shama.” Jesus confirms that obedience is fed by love. He said to His disciples: “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” And: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.”⁴

The Hebrew word rendered “detestable” is *tow`ebah*, which literally means “abomination.” It is used in the Bible to classify homosexual behavior.⁵

This verse teaches us how God experiences our prayers if we do not pray from an attitude of love and obedience; our prayers stink! Prayer in the Bible is represented under the symbol of incense. We read in Revelation: “They were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” and “Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand.”⁶ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “He who will not hear does not deserve to be heard.”

10 He who leads the upright along an evil path will fall into his own trap, but the blameless will receive a good inheritance.

Jesus said: “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!”⁷ That warning is issued to people who cause temptation and also to those who fall for it. Reading the whole text, we see that our Lord focuses particularly upon those who prey on children: “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”⁸ In our modern world whole

1. Deut. 23:19,20

2. John 4:22

3. Deut. 6:4,5

4. John 14:15, 23,24

5. See Lev. 18:22.

6. See Rev. 5:8; 8:3,4.

7. Matt. 18:7

8. Matt. 18:10

industries are geared toward temptation of the masses. In our advertising we want people to buy what they do not need or want and in the sale of pornography we want them to do what they should not. The blameless are those who trust the Lord in their temptation and who receive their eternal inheritance. Only God can keep us from stumbling.¹

11 A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees through him.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes about this proverb: “Three things are implied in the saying: (a) wisdom is no respecter of rank; (b) complacency is no symptom of wisdom; (c) a man’s peers are not always his best judges.”

Jesus said to the church in Laodicea: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”² What causes the blindness in the man in this proverb is his material possessions. He believes that his money determines the value of his soul. But Jesus says: “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”³

The Pulpit Commentary astutely observes: “A rich man thinks so highly of his position, is so flattered by parasites, and deems himself placed so immeasurably above social inferiors, that he learns to consider himself possessed of other qualifications, even mental and intellectual gifts, with which wealth has no concern. This purse-proud arrogance which looks upon financial skill and sharpness in bargaining as true wisdom, is confined to no age or country.”

We must know what standards to use when we evaluate ourselves. The standards we apply to our own life will also determine how we see others. God may use those we consider as not measuring up to our level to testify against us on the Day of Judgment. Jesus said to the people of Capernaum: “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.”⁴

This proverb raises the question as to who is rich and who is poor. The Hebrew word, rendered “understanding,” is *biyn*. In the opening words of *The Book of Proverbs* it is used in combination with wisdom and discipline.⁵ The person who has *biyn* has what life is all about.

12 When the righteous triumph, there is great elation; but when the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding.

The same theme is expressed in an earlier proverb and also in a later one. We read: “When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.”⁶ And “When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.”⁷

The Hebrew text of this proverb is rather complicated. It reads literally: “When righteous men do rejoice there is great glory: but when the wicked rise a man is hidden.” The Hebrew word *alats* means “to jump for joy.” It has a note of victory in it. For that reason it is sometimes rendered as “to triumph,” as in the verse: “In you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.”⁸ I

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1. See Jude v.24.
 2. Rev. 3:17
 3. Luke 12:15
 4. Matt. 12:41
 5. See Prov. 1:2.
 6. Prov. 11:10
 7. Prov. 29:2
 8. Ps. 25:2

remember from personal experience that my parents kept Jews hidden in our home to safeguard them from ending up in Hitler's concentration camp where they would be exterminated. I also remember the exuberance when the war in Europe ended and righteousness was restored. There are many instances in world history that illustrate the principle expressed in this proverb. The ultimate triumph will be when God brings down the whole world system that is now under Satan's dominion. As we read in Revelation: "After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.' And again they shouted: 'Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.'" ¹

13 He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

14 Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.

The cover-up of sin often causes more damage than the act itself. It appears that when Adam and Eve went into hiding after having eaten the forbidden fruit they aggravated the consequences of their deed. We do not know what would have happened if they had waited for God after their transgression and confessed. Satan's power over them might have been broken then and there. It was when David tried to cover up his sin with Bathsheba that he turned from an adulterer into a murderer. What brought down President Nixon was not the Watergate break-in but the concealment. Sin will eat away at our body if we hide it in our heart; there is healing in confession.

The Hebrew word used for "sin" in this verse is *pesha'*, which is usually rendered "transgression," or "trespass." It means crossing the boundaries and it presupposes knowledge of the limits. It is a conscious act of crossing the line. Confession must be accompanied by turning away from the sin. Then we will find God's mercy. The Hebrew word for mercy is *racham*, which literally means "to fondle," or "to love." It is what the father of the prodigal did to his son when he returned and "he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."² God will throw His arms around us and hug us when we ask Him for forgiveness.

Confession of sin will make us realize how foolish we are when we try to cover anything from an omniscient and all-seeing God. What can we hide and where can we hide from the omnipresent One?

This brings us to v.14. Wisdom, the art of living, is based on fear of the Lord. If we know Who the One is we are dealing with, the thought of hiding our sin will never occur to us. The difference between the godly and ungodly is not in committing sin, but in how we handle sin after it is committed.

Actually, the words "the LORD" are not in the original. That is the reason some interpret the word "fear" to mean "to be reverent." *The New King James Version*, for instance, reads: "Happy is the man who is always reverent, But he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity." *The New Living Translation*: "Blessed are those who have a tender conscience, but the stubborn are headed for serious trouble." The Hebrew word *pachad* has the meaning of being alarmed. The verse could be seen as meaning that we must have a healthy fear of falling into temptation.

15 Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked man ruling over a helpless people.

16 A tyrannical ruler lacks judgment, but he who hates ill-gotten gain will enjoy a long life.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on these verses: "The reproach implicit in the comparison with wild beasts is explicit in 16. The tyrant is in God's eyes subhuman (15), stupid (16a) and short-lived (16b)."

V.16 points to the motivation for wild behavior as being greed. The lust for money makes the ruler into a tyrant. When God created man in His image and likeness, He placed him as ruler over the rest of His

1. Rev.19:1-3

2. Luke 15:20

creation. When God blessed the first couple, He said: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”¹ And David sang: “For you made us only a little lower than God, and you crowned us with glory and honor. You put us in charge of everything you made, giving us authority over all things — the sheep and the cattle and all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and everything that swims the ocean currents.”² There is no indication that man was ever meant to rule over other human beings. Human government became an institution when sin entered God’s creation. The tyrant not only fails to rule over God’s fauna, by being dominated by animal instincts, the animal rules in him. Few rulers recognize the corrupting tendency of power. The tyrant no longer ruled but is being ruled. Satan achieves his goal in that person.

17 A man tormented by the guilt of murder will be a fugitive till death; let no one support him.

18 He whose walk is blameless is kept safe, but he whose ways are perverse will suddenly fall.

The Hebrew text of v.17 reads literally: “A man that does violence to the blood of any person shall flee to the pit; let no man stay him.”

The Hebrew word *bowr*, pit, has the same double meaning as in English: it can mean “a cistern” or “the pits.” In Proverbs, we find it with both meanings, as in: “Drink water from your own *cistern*, running water from your own well,”³ or: “Come along with us; let’s lie in wait for someone’s blood, let’s waylay some harmless soul; let’s swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the *pit*.”⁴

These verses seem to say that crime has its own punishment. The Law of Moses demanded the death penalty for murder. The torment of the murderer in v.17 seems to be the result of the perpetrator’s effort to evade punishment. For the person who confesses there may be execution but the death of one’s conscience is worse than the death of a body. Jesus said to the murderer who confessed: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”⁵ In Dostoyewski’s great novel *Crime and Punishment*, the murderer found relief in the New Testament of his girlfriend.

A clear conscience is the best protection against falling. The God who cleanses our heart when we confess our sins is also able to keep us from falling.⁶ A clear conscience is a forgiven conscience. V.18 seems to suggest that everyone is ultimately capable of murder; but God is able to safeguard us.

The plural “ways” has caused some Bible scholars to interpret it as “two ways,” or “double way.” *The Pulpit Commentary*, therefore, observes: “The man who is not straightforward, but vacillates between right and wrong, or pretends to be pursuing one path while he is really taking another, shall fall suddenly and without warning.” Our moral protection is in a single-minded concentration upon God’s way. A previous proverb proclaimed the same truth: “The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.”⁷

19 He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty.

20 A faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished.

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1. Gen. 1:28
 2. Ps. 8:5-8 (NLT)
 3. Prov. 5:15
 4. Prov. 1:11,12
 5. Luke 23:43 (“I tell you the truth” is in Greek: “Amen.”).
 6. Jude v.24
 7. Prov. 10:9

We saw an earlier companion to v.19 in “He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.”¹ If wisdom is fed by the fear of the Lord, then the lack of it will make a person a fantasist. Taking God into account in the fullest sense of the word will make us realists. The first lesson of this verse is that God will not let us starve if we put our trust in Him. In Jesus’ words: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”²

Yet we must not look in this verse for a confirmation of a “health and wealth” Gospel. God promises to provide us with the necessities of life if we trust Him for it, but it is up to us to learn to be satisfied with what we have. The prophet Hosea sheds a better light on this with his admonition: “Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.”³ And the Apostle Paul speaks the same language in his Epistle to the Galatians: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”⁴

In v.20, the Hebrew word, rendered “faithful” is *‘emuwnah*, which is related to the Hebrew word *emeth*, “truth.” It stands for “moral fidelity.” We find the same word in the proverb: “He who speaks truth declares righteousness, but a false witness, deceit.”⁵

The “one eager to get rich” in v.20 is the one who takes shortcuts. The Hebrew word *‘uwts*, means “to hurry.” As we saw earlier, it does not have a positive connotation in *The Book of Proverbs*. As in all aspects of life, there is no substitute for growth. The devil propagates instant satisfaction. That is how he enticed our first parents in paradise. God wants us to become like Himself, but not by eating from the tree of knowledge. God wants us to become rich in Him, not without Him.

21 To show partiality is not good — yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread.

22 A stingy man is eager to get rich and is unaware that poverty awaits him.

V.20 is evidently addressed to the judges of the land. Previous proverbs condemned favoritism by stating: “It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice” and “To show partiality in judging is not good.”⁶ This proverb suggests that even the smallest bribe can make a person into a crook. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “The judge who at first was induced only by a great price to transgress by favoring one side, through the habit of sinning comes at last to do so for a mere trifle.” The Hebrew expression rendered “to show partiality” is “to choose one’s face.” It points to the human tendency of judging someone on the basis of an outward appearance. This is illustrated in

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1. Prov. 12:11
 2. Matt. 6:25-27, 31-33
 3. Hos. 10:12
 4. Gal. 6:7-10
 5. Prov. 10:12 (NKJV)
 6. Prov. 18:5; 24:23

Samuel's reaction when God sent him to anoint David as future king of Israel. We read: "When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, 'Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD.' But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart' "¹ God is not a respecter of persons."²

V.22 is the twin of v.20. But here the paradox between the inner drive and outward appearance is emphasized. The Hebrew text reads literally: "He who is hasty to get rich has an evil eye and considers not that poverty shall come upon him." The same idiom is found in the proverb: "Do not eat the food of a *stingy* man, do not crave his delicacies for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost."³ *The New King James Version* preserves the original in the rendering: "A man with an evil eye hastens after riches, And does not consider that poverty will come upon him." The "evil eye" is the eye that looks at life in the wrong way. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes about such a person: "The man of evil eye ... is the envious and covetous man; such a one tries to improve his position and raise himself speedily to the height of him whom he envies, and is quite unscrupulous as to the means which he uses to effect his purpose, and keeps all that he gains selfishly to himself. And yet he is really blind to his own best interests."

It is the eye Jesus spoke about: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"⁴

23 He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue.

Two parties are involved in this proverb: the one who speaks and the one who is addressed. There may actually be four if we take the speaker or the hearer to be two different persons. For many people confrontation is something unpleasant. Pointing out character faults or reminding others of a responsibility they failed to meet can be difficult. People who take pleasure in doing this are usually people to be avoided.

The proverb obviously does not advocate meddling in someone else's business. The rebuke, when it must be made, ought to be made in love and for the purpose of improving, not to give vent to a critical spirit. There are relationships in which rebukes are appropriate and others in which they are not. For instance, it is a parent's duty to rebuke his or her child for misbehavior. A supervisor must reprove an underling for sloppy performance.

We note that rebuke in this proverb is contrasted with flattery. This determines the lesson we must draw from it. The supposition is that the rebuke is appropriate and that flattering, which means to praise that which is not praiseworthy, is done from ulterior motives. Flattery and praise are not identical. Also, the expression "flattering tongue" points more to character than to speech. Flattery presupposes insincerity. The purpose of flattery is to obtain favor, supposedly with the intent of personal gain for the speaker.

The Hebrew word for "favor" is *chen*, which sometimes is rendered "grace." As such we find it in the proverb: "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to *grace* your head and a chain to adorn your neck."⁵

If we tend to flatter others but find it difficult to confront people we may have to take a closer look our relationship with the Lord. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ."⁶

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1. I Sam. 16:6,7
 2. See II Chron. 19:7 (KJV).
 3. Prov. 23:6,7
 4. Matt. 6:22,23
 5. Prov. 1:8,9

The most important application of this proverb may be that we open ourselves up for God's critical assessment of our life. The Holy Spirit will search our heart if we ask Him to do so and will reveal the obstacles to our sanctification.

24 He who robs his father or mother and says, "It's not wrong" — he is partner to him who destroys.

25 A greedy man stirs up dissension, but he who trusts in the LORD will prosper.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes about v.24: "Knox: 'Shall he who robs father or mother make light of it? He is next door to a murderer.' Jesus showed that there are refined ways of incurring this guilt (Mk. 7:11); cf. Paul's strong words in I Timothy 5:4,8." The quoted verses read: "But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God) then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother."¹ And: "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

The Hebrew text of v.24 reads literally: "Whoso robs his father or his mother and says: It is no transgression; the same is a companion of a destroyer." "To rob" in Hebrew is *gazel*, which carries with it the idea of violence. The word rendered "destroyer" is *shachath*, which means "decay" or "ruin." We find it in the verse: "Now the earth was *corrupt* in God's sight and was full of violence."² The Fifth Commandment states: "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."³ If we violate this commandment by using violence against our parents we demonstrate how deeply corruption has penetrated our soul. Love for parents is the most natural of all loves; if that love turns into hatred we sin against our own nature. Such sin is self-destructive.

V.25 identifies this sin as greed and contrasts it with trust. If v.24 played itself out in the context of the family, v.25 affects the whole of society. *The New King James Version* takes the Hebrew literally in its rendering "He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife, But he who trusts in the LORD will be prospered." "Will be prospered" in Hebrew is "shall be made fat." Such a statement does not go over well in our weight-conscious modern society. It seems ironic that greed can express itself in dieting. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes that "the proud heart" literally means, *he that is of a wide soul*. *The Commentary* continues: "This may certainly denote pride ... in which case the gnome says that one who thinks much of himself and despises others is the cause of quarrels and dissensions, occasioned by his struggles for pre-eminence and the ill feeling arising from his overbearing and supercilious conduct. Others, and rightly, take the wide soul to denote covetousness." Briefly stated, the proverb proclaims that greed causes the corruption of society. The Apostle Paul confirms this in his letter to Timothy: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."⁴

The antidote to greed is trust in God. The author of Hebrew expresses this beautifully: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"⁵ The prosperity that comes from trusting God may not be what the world defines as such, but it will be the blessing that goes beyond material comfort to what satisfies our real needs.

6. Gal. 1:10

1. Mark 7:12 is added.

2. Gen. 6:11

3. Ex. 20:12

4. I Tim. 6:10

5. Heb. 13:5

26 He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.

27 He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.

The mention of trust in v.26 links it to the previous proverb. Self-trust is contrasted to walking in wisdom and foolishness to safety. He who trusts himself is a fool. Declaring ourselves independent from God amounts to believing that we have life in ourselves. We all know, however, that life is given to us and it is taken away. To believe that we will not die is foolish and contrary to all evidence. Jesus is the only one who could say: “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.”¹ God shares this life with us if we put our trust in Him. Failing to trust God leads to self-destruction.

The Hebrew word rendered “kept safe” in *The New International Version* is *malat*, which literally means: “to be smooth.” It is usually translated “to escape” as in the verse: “So it came to pass, when they had brought them outside, that he said, ‘*Escape* for your life! Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain. *Escape* to the mountains, lest you be destroyed.’”² The thought of escaping judgment by walking in wisdom is probably what is expressed here.

V.27 shows the fruit of walking in wisdom. Our safety demonstrates itself in how much we give away. Jim Eliot said: “He is no fool who loses what he cannot keep in order to keep what he cannot lose.” We confirm and increase our safety in increasing our losses. The Mosaic Law commanded generosity. We read: “If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: ‘The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,’ so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.”³

If being tight-fisted creates curses, generosity will generate blessing. The Apostle Paul left us a quotation of Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”⁴

28 When the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding; but when the wicked perish, the righteous thrive.

This verse is the twin of v.12: “When the righteous triumph, there is great elation; but when the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding.”

3. Chapter 29:1-27

1 A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy.

In the first chapter of this book, Lady Wisdom called out loud publicly to invite people to accept wisdom and warn them if they refused. She said: “If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you — when calamity

1. John 5:26
2. Gen. 19:17 (NKJV)
3. Deut. 15:7-11
4. Acts 20:35

overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.”¹ The best illustration is of Pharaoh who hardened his heart prior to and during Israel’s exodus from Egypt, and drowned with his army in the Red Sea.

When we look at the verse for a personal application, we note that, ultimately, we are responsible for the consequences of what happens to us in life. The Hebrew word for “rebuke” is *towkechah*, which means “chastisement.” We noted before that the word was used three times in Chapter One of this book.² No one is exempt from hardship in life. Death casts its shadow on every person in this world and most of us will experience sickness or hardships in physical or psychological form. Efforts to avoid suffering may lead us away from God. Jesus compared life to a choice between a broad way and a small path. The choice is represented by a narrow gate that is difficult to squeeze through or a large one that allows easy passage. We read: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”³ The author of Hebrews states that God’s chastisements are leading us toward His holiness. “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”⁴

If we look upon chastisement as part of our pilgrimage, we will bow our head instead of stiffening our neck. C. S. Lewis said about suffering: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” The Apostles Paul and Barnabas encouraged the churches in Asia Minor by telling them: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”⁵ If our painful experiences cause us to rebel against God, we are like children that spit out the medicine that will cure their sickness and save their life.

The Hebrew word *marpe’*, rendered remedy, has the double meaning of “a cure” or “incurable.” We find it in the verse: “After all this, the LORD afflicted Jehoram with an *incurable* disease of the bowels;”⁶ and also in: “But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no *remedy*.”⁷

2 When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “When the righteous are in authority the people rejoice: but when the wicked bear rule the people groan.” The difference in reading, evidently, depends upon the consonants that are seen in the Hebrew word *rabah*. The verb is the same as the one used in the last verse of the previous chapter. Whether they rule or thrive, the number of righteous will influence the moral tone of society as well as its safety. As we learn from Abraham’s intercessory prayer, ten righteous people could have saved the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁸

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1. Prov. 1:23-27
 2. See Prov. 1:23,25,30.
 3. Matt. 7:13,14
 4. Heb. 12:5-10
 5. Acts 14:22
 6. II Chron. 21:18
 7. II Chron. 36:16

3 A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth.

An earlier proverb stated: “A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother.”¹ An example of this kind of father-son relationship is illustrated in Jesus’ *Parable of the Prodigal Son*.² The proverb says more than that wisdom will protect against sexual temptation or that parents leave their wealth to their children. Prostitution in the Old Testament was seen as symbolic for involvement in idol worship and a Jewish heritage consisted of one’s place in the Promised Land. A son’s decision to fear God brings his affiliation with his father to a higher level.

4 By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down.

The role of the king is again the subject in v.14 of this chapter. The Hebrew text here reads literally: “The king establishes the land by judgment: but that receives gifts overthrows it.” The Hebrew word for justice is *mishpat*, which refers to a judicially pronounced verdict. Justice stands for the application of the law. In recent days the role of judges in the United States of America has been the subject of debate. Some judges have been accused of legislating from the bench, rather than interpreting and applying the law. If justice is not seen as an absolute, as a divine attribute, the moral foundations of a country crumble. The king who sells justice instead of meting it out will perish with his country.

When corruption has eaten its way all the way up to the throne of a nation, its very existence is in danger. World history shows a long trail of empires that disintegrated through inner rot.

5 Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet.

6 An evil man is snared by his own sin, but a righteous one can sing and be glad.

Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, paraphrases these two verses: “A flattering neighbor is up to no good; he’s probably planning to take advantage of you.” And: “Evil people fall into their own traps; good people run the other way, glad to escape.” Derek Kidner, in his introduction to *Proverbs*, states about flattery: “One’s self-esteem [may be] ruinously inflated by flattery (which entangles its victim ... by the craving it induces and by the ill-judged actions it invites).” “Flattery” is *chalaq* in Hebrew. Its original meaning is “to be smooth” like stones that have been made round by water in a river. But is also has the meaning of separating, as in the verse: “During the night Abram *divided* his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus.”³ It is the smoothness that separates that gives to *chalaq* the meaning of flattery. In our modern speech flattery means excessive praise given from ulterior motives. It is manipulative in that it wants to use a person rather than to praise him. We rarely admire the people we flatter. The problem with flattery is that it is often misunderstood by the one who receives it. Our vanity tends to make us believe that it is true what people say about us. Flattery may induce us to act upon it and take the bait. Acting upon flattery means acting upon a lie.

The verse addresses the person who flatters, not the one who receives the compliments. The obvious danger is that we flatter other people without realizing what we are doing, which is leading them into a trap. In our eagerness to please others we may lead them down a trail to destruction. Satan uses flattery very effectively. We ought to make up our minds not to become one of his agents. We must also be aware of the fact that the devil is much more dangerous when he compliments than when he accuses.

8. See Gen. 18:20-33.

1. Prov. 10:1

2. Luke 15:11-32

3. Gen. 14:15

Vv.5 and 6 are linked together by the concept of a snare. The words “net” and “snare” are not identical in Hebrew or in English but their close connection is obvious. In v.5 the net is spread outside by another, in v.6 it is found inside. Sin within us makes life into a huge spiderweb in which we are called. Like the fly that is caught, we cannot disentangle ourselves. The more we try, the closer we move toward destruction. It is the moving of the net that excites the spider and turns her into a killer.

7 The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

8 Mockers stir up a city, but wise men turn away anger.

Young's Literal Translation reads v.7: “The righteous knoweth the plea of the poor, The wicked understandeth not knowledge.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “*Knows* and *knowledge* (RSV) refer to the personal concern which makes the verb ‘to know’ far richer in Heb. than in English. Line 2 (lit. ‘... understandeth not knowledge’) is well interpreted by RSV’s insertion of *such* before *knowledge*. A fine example of such care is seen in Job 29:12-27.” The quoted verses read: “Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow’s heart sing. I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth.”¹

The verse exemplifies the practical side of the command: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself.”² If faith in God does not translate into neighborly love, faith is dead. In the words of James: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”³

The Hebrew text of v.8 establishes a connection with the previous proverb in a way that is not clear in any English translation. We read literally: “Scornful men bring a city into a snare: but wise men turn away wrath.” The Hebrew word for “snare” is *puwach*, which literally means: “to puff.” It is sometimes rendered “to sneer,” as in the verse: “His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he *sneers* at all his enemies.” In *The Book of Proverbs*, it is often used in the sense of “to tell lies,” as in: “A truthful witness does not deceive, but a false witness *pours out lies*.”⁴ The political unrest in the city is caused by the way justice is treated. The false witness in the courtroom is the one who has no personal concern for the poor. The wrath v.8 speaks about is not necessarily street fights or political unrest, but the wrath of God. The wise who care for justice because of their concern for people who cannot defend themselves, are the ones who protect the city from the wrath to come.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments here: “Scornful men (who, when reproved for sin, not only do not repent, but scorn at divine and human laws) bring a city into a snare. Scorners are especially dangerous in the legislature, as they sneer at all warnings of danger caused to the State by innovations against the divine law. Dangers are no longer light when they are despised as light. ‘Bring into a snare’ [*yaapiychuw*, from *puwach*, ‘a snare’]; or, as margin, ‘set on fire’ (from *piyach*, a spark); or, ‘blow violently upon’ (from *naapach*, to blow) - i.e., excite seditions in a city.”

9 If a wise man goes to court with a fool, the fool rages and scoffs, and there is no peace.

10 Bloodthirsty men hate a man of integrity and seek to kill the upright.

1. Actually Job 29:11-17.

2. Matt. 22:37,39

3. James 1:27

4. Prov. 14:5

- 11 A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.**
12 If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked.
13 The poor man and the oppressor have this in common: The LORD gives sight to the eyes of both.
14 If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure.

These six verses apparently have the setting of the courtroom in common. The Hebrew text reads literally: “If a wise man contends with a foolish man, whether he rage or laugh there is no rest.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes about v.9: “The general sense is clear: there is no arguing calmly with a fool. But it is uncertain whether the subject of line 2 is the wise man (whose tactics are all unavailing) or, as seems more probable, the fool (who will adopt any approach but the quietly objective).” *The New International Version* answers that question by inserting “the fool” also in the second clause. That version also provides the décor of the courtroom, which is not directly provided by the Hebrew text. *The New Living Translation* sides with the NIV in the rendering: “If a wise person takes a fool to court, there will be ranting and ridicule but no satisfaction.” But *The Living Bible* reads: “There’s no use arguing with a fool. He only rages and scoffs, and tempers flare.” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, leaves the setting in the middle with the paraphrase: “A sage trying to work things out with a fool gets only scorn and sarcasm for his trouble.”

This makes us take a second look at Derek Kidner’s observation that the general sense of the proverb is clear. It seems to me that the difference between a wise person and a fool is not merely in the way they argue, but in the lack of a common philosophy of life. The proverb does not specify the subject of the argument (whether it is taken to court or not is not important). In order to settle an argument there must be a common ground upon which arguments can be settled. V.13 in this section seems to point in that direction. One human being can only take another one to court if both parties recognize one another as being on the same level. A human being cannot take an orangutan to court and win a case. A mentally stable person cannot even win a case against somebody who pleads insanity. In a courtroom where people fail to recognize absolute standards of morality it is nigh to impossible to build a case upon the difference between right and wrong.

The essence of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; this means recognition that God is the absolute standard of good. The quintessence of foolishness is denial of that absolute.

In the clause “there is no rest,” the Hebrew word is not *shalom*, but *nachath*. This is the only place in *The Book of Proverbs* where this word is used. It literally means “a descent,” as in “an imposition.” We find it in the verse: “The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.”¹ In the verse in Proverbs it is used in the sense of “a settlement.”

V.10 is difficult to interpret. The Hebrew text reads literally: “The bloodthirsty hate the upright: but the just seek his soul.” Bible scholars are divided about the meaning of the second part of the proverb and a look at the different translations is proof of this. *The King James Version* sticks word-for-word to the Hebrew text without any effort to clarify. *The New King James Version* reads: “The bloodthirsty hate the blameless, But the upright seek his well-being.” *The New Living Translation* reads: “The bloodthirsty hate the honest, but the upright seek out the honest.” *The Living Bible*: “The godly pray for those who long to kill them.” An earlier proverb: “The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the speech of the upright rescues them,”² may shed some light on the meaning. But some scholars believe that “seek his soul” means “to take vengeance.” If we side with *The Living Bible*, we see the principle exemplified in Jesus’ prayer for the ones who crucified Him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”³ Stephen emulated this when he was being executed and prayed: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”⁴

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1. Isa. 30:30
 2. Prov. 12:6
 3. Luke 23:34

As Derek Kidner observes in *Proverbs*, that to seek a person's soul is usually a hostile expression in the Old Testament, as in Elijah's complaint to God: "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."¹

The Hebrew text of v.11 reads literally: "A fool utters all his mind: but a wise man keeps it in till afterwards." The Hebrew word *shabach* means literally "to address in a loud tone." It has a variety of meanings from "praise" to "keeping under control." We find it in the first sense of praise in the verse: "Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you."² And in the second sense of controlling in: "You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas, who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength, who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations."³ The wise man in Proverbs orders his temper to remain quiet.

The theme of the fool and his temper occurs several times in *The Book of Proverbs*. We find it in the verse: "A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated."⁴ And in: "A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly."⁵ Also in: "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city."⁶ And finally in: "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control."⁷ Self-control is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.⁸ The fool is the person who loses his temper because he tries to control himself. The wise man has turned the control of his life over to God and the Holy Spirit in him keeps him from flaring up.

If we keep in mind that the background of these verses is the courtroom, we understand how important it is to have the Holy Spirit, God's advocate, the One who intercedes for us, at our side.

In the second clause of v.12, the word "become" in "all his officials become wicked" is not in the Hebrew text. This allows us to assume that the judge or the ruler does not want to hear the truth but prefers to listen to the lies his servants tell him. And the servants are wicked enough to tell him what he wants to hear. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes here: "Wherever the system of espionage is permitted to prevail, there the system of falsity is established; for he who is capable of being a spy and informer, is not only capable of telling and swearing lies, but also of cutting his king's or even his father's throat. I have seen cases, where the same spy received pay from both parties, and deceived both." And *Barnes' Notes* adds: "They know what will please, and they become informers and backbiters."

V.13 does more than trace the origin of mankind back to its common Creator as a previous proverb did. We read earlier: "Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all."⁹ The emphasis here is on eyesight, which is on perception. The fact that a person is poor does not imply that his vision is. On the other hand what makes a person an oppressor is his lack of vision. The suggestion that God withholds insight to such a person is consistent with the lesson of Scripture that God hardens the heart of those who refuse to obey. Pharaoh, who refused to let God's people go, is a case in point.¹⁰

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4. Acts 7:60
 1. I Kings 19:10
 2. Ps. 63:3
 3. Ps. 65:5-7
 4. Prov. 14:17
 5. Prov. 14:29
 6. Prov. 16:32
 7. Prov. 25:28
 8. See Gal. 5:22,23.
 9. Prov. 22:2
 10. See Ex. 7:13; 10:20.

As in Pharaoh's case, the problem is that God seems to take the credit for the hardening of his heart. We read six times that Pharaoh hardened his heart¹ before we read for the first time that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. In Exodus we read: "But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses."² So the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was not the result of God's predetermination, but of his own choice. In the same way the eyesight of the oppressor is limited not because of God's predetermination but because of the evil man's choice. God will give us as much light as we ask Him for.

V.14 seems to give a promise that cannot be fulfilled on earth. However righteous a king may be in the way he handles his court cases, his throne is never eternally secure. The wording here is the same as in the annunciation of Jesus' birth: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."³ The Living Bible tries to solve the problem with the paraphrase: "A king who is fair to the poor shall have a long reign." But a long reign is not the same as an eternal one. In *The Parable of the Dishonest Manager*, Jesus seems to make a connection between the way we handle our affairs on earth and what we will do in heaven. We read: "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"⁴ The judge who applies justice impartially will sit on the bench when angels are being judged. As the Apostle Paul says: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!"⁵ And if we behave like royalty while on earth, we will reign with Christ in eternity. "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."⁶ And: "There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever."⁷

15 The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.

16 When the wicked thrive, so does sin, but the righteous will see their downfall.

17 Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul.

18 Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law.

19 A servant cannot be corrected by mere words; though he understands, he will not respond.

These five verses have the theme of man's sinful nature in common and they suggest the way to deal with it. V.15 begins at home and v.19 returns to the same place, dealing with the consequences of neglect. V.17 shows what happens if the principle of correction is applied properly. The other verses, 16 and 18 which are woven in between, indicate that what happens in the home will set the trend for all of society.

The application of physical discipline in the raising of children is a recurring theme in *The Book of Proverbs*. We read earlier: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him."⁸ And: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far

1. See Ex. 7:13,22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7, (34).

2. Ex. 9:12

3. Luke 1:32,33

4. Luke 16:10-12

5. I Cor. 6:2,3

6. Rom. 5:17

7. Rev. 22:5

from him.”¹ And: “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.”²

We observed earlier that in modern western society corporal punishment is declared anathema. Mushrooming of cases of child abuse, accounts for this shift in public opinion. The Bible does not condone child abuse but it recommends spanking as an effective means of teaching a young child. God wants us to associate physical pain with evil in childhood in order to train us to make the right moral choices as we grow up. It is obvious that there is a difference between spanking and abuse. It is at this point that public opinion goes astray. As is always the case with public opinion, the pendulum swings from one extreme to the other and I foresee a time where the rod will be introduced anew and spanking will be regarded as appropriate.

The important feature in v.15 is in the addition of the thought that if a child is left to himself, he will go astray. Our sinful nature will not only demonstrate itself as we grow up, it will take over if it remains unchecked. G. K. Chesterton once said that a fencepost left by itself will rot. In the proverbs quoted above, it is the father who applies the rod to his son’s back. In the proverb before us, the mother is mentioned as the one who will experience the sorrow of her child’s rejection. In the ideal family a child grows up under the balanced combination of the father’s strong and protecting love and the mother’s warmth. The verse suggests that where the father’s discipline fails, even the mother’s affection remains without effect. Where the father figure stays out of the picture, the mother’s love will not be enough to compensate. The multitude of broken homes in modern society testifies to this.

Yet we know that wisdom is not hereditary. A father will not make his son wise by spanking him. But where no discipline is applied the child will not set out for wisdom either. No one who lets himself go, who does not realize his own need for discipline, will find wisdom. The path to heaven is the narrow one.

V.16 goes from sinful nature to sinful act. In Romans, the Apostle Paul develops the thought that, although our sinful nature will cause us to sin, we die because of our sinful nature, rather than because of our sinful acts.³ Paul demonstrates that the reason God chooses to condemn us to death in Adam is so that He can save us in Christ. But this does not mean that we will not be held responsible for the sinful acts we commit.

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, *The Septuagint* renders v.16: “When the godless increase, transgression increases, but when they fall, the righteous become fearful.” *The Commentary* observes: “Where the wicked get the upper hand in a community, their evil example is copied, and a lowering of moral tone and a general laxity in conduct prevail.” The assurance that the righteous will see the collapse of all evil empires is born out in world history. The fact that sin is self-destructive accounts for its downfall. Corruption always assures disintegration.

V.17 shows the other side of the coin presented in v.15. The positive effect of discipline is delight for the one who administers it, when he sees the fruit it bears. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Correct your son and he shall give you rest; yea he shall give delight unto your soul.” The Hebrew word rendered “delight” is *ma`adan*, which literally means “a delicacy.” We find the word in the Jacob’s blessing for Asher: “Asher’s food will be rich; he will provide delicacies fit for a king.”⁴ Eugene H. Peterson captures well the meaning with his paraphrase in *Proverbs*: “Discipline your children; you’ll be glad you did—they’ll turn out delightful to live with.” The reason why some parents do not discipline their children is that it is emotionally more painful for a parent to spank than it is physically for a child to endure it. The emotional delight in seeing the fruit of discipline in the life of a child ought to be ample compensation for the pain suffered earlier. On the other hand the pain of neglect will be much worse than the pain of application.

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8. Prov. 13:24
 1. Prov. 22:15
 2. Prov. 23:13,14
 3. See Rom. 5:12-21.
 4. Gen. 49:20

V.18 is one of the great verses in *The Book of Proverbs*. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keeps the law, happy is he.” *The New International Version* correctly renders the Hebrew word *chazown* “revelation.” The word is used for the first time in the Old Testament in the verse: “In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.”¹ It is the parallel use of “vision” and “the Word of the LORD” that gives us a clear understanding of what is meant. It is the Word of God that saves us from perdition. Before that Word was written in the form in which we have it now, it came to certain people in visions, dreams and revelations. Today it mainly comes to us from the printed pages of the Old and New Testament. But the truth has remained the same that, in the words of the Apostle Paul: “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”²

The Hebrew word, rendered “perish” is *para*, which means, “to expose.” It is sometimes rendered “naked.” We find it in the verse: “Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies.”³ *The King James Version* renders it: “And when Moses saw that the people were naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies:).” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: “This latter verse is perhaps the intended background to the proverb, with its contrast between the glory on the mountain of vision and law, and the shame in the valley. I Samuel 3:1, with its context, also exemplifies the saying, in showing the dependence of public morality on the knowledge of God.”

As in the case of the first couple’s sin, when God covered them with the skin of an animal, so is our spiritual nakedness covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. God’s ultimate revelation was the incarnation, “God was manifested in the flesh.”⁴ If God had not become man in Jesus Christ the whole world would have perished.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “‘Vision,’ ... prophecy in its widest sense, denotes the revelation of God’s will made through agents, which directed the course of events, and was intended to be coordinate with the supreme secular authority. The prophets were the instructors of the people in Divine things, standing witnesses of the truth and power of religion, teaching a higher than mere human morality. The fatal effect of the absence of such revelation of God’s will is stated to be confusion, disorder, and rebellion; the people, uncontrolled, fall into grievous excesses, which nothing but high principles can restrain.” According to the *Commentary, the Septuagint* reads, “There shall be no interpreter... to a sinful nation, but he that keeps the Law is most blessed.”

Jesus considers us His relatives if we keep the Word of God: “My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.”⁵ He also said: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”⁶

V.19 still fits into the context of the sinful nature. The “servant,” *’ebed* in Hebrew, is here not his master’s confidant but a slave. Noah used the word when he punished his son Ham, saying: “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of *slaves* will he be to his brothers.”⁷ *The Septuagint* adds the word “stubborn” to “slave.” This servant fits in the category of which Jesus said: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son

1. I Sam. 3:1
2. II Cor. 4:6
3. Ex. 32:25
4. I Tim. 3:16 (NKJV)
5. Luke 8:21
6. Luke 11:28
7. Gen. 9:25

sets you free, you will be free indeed.”¹ *The Book of Proverbs* does not encourage maltreatment of lower-class people. This verse does not give license to beat a slave. As a matter of fact it elevates the servant in that it gives him the same treatment as the father gives to his son.

20 Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Referring to the previous proverb, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The dull, stupid man ... may be instructed and guided and made to listen to reason; the hasty and ill-advised speaker consults no one, takes no thought before he speaks, nor reflects on the effect of his words; such a man it is almost impossible to reform (see... James 3:5, etc.). ‘Every one that speaks,’ says St. Gregory, ‘while he waits for his hearer’s sentence upon his words, is as it were subjected to the judgment of him by whom he is heard. Accordingly, he that fears to be condemned in respect of his words ought first to put to the test that which he delivers — that there may be a kind of impartial and sober umpire sitting between the ear and tongue, weighing with exactness whether the heart presents right words, which the tongue taking up with advantage may bring forward for the hearer’s judgment’ ” Ecclesiastes carries this even further by putting the admonition into our relation with God. We read: “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”²

21 If a man pampers his servant from youth, he will bring grief in the end.

This verse may be the most controversial one in *The Book of Proverbs* as far as interpretation is concerned. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The word rendered ‘son’ ... is of doubtful meaning, and has been variously understood or misunderstood by interpreters.” Actually, there are two Hebrew words in this proverb, *panaq*, rendered “pamper” and *manown*, rendered “grief” that appear nowhere else in the Old Testament. A sample of various renderings will suffice to prove the difficulties. *The King James Version* reads: “He that delicately bringeth up his servant from a child shall have him become his son at the length.” *The New King James Version*: “He who pampers his servant from childhood will have him as a son in the end.” *The Revised Standard Version*: “He who pampers his servant from childhood, will in the end find him his heir.” *The New Living Translation*: “A servant who is pampered from childhood will later become a rebel.” *The Living Bible*: “Pamper a servant from childhood, and he will expect you to treat him as a son!” Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, is farthest from all the others with: “If you let people treat you like a doormat, you’ll be quite forgotten in the end.”

The Pulpit Commentary suggests: “It seems safest in this uncertainty to adopt the Jewish interpretation of ‘progeny:’ ‘he will be as a son.’ The pampered servant will end by claiming the privileges of a son, and perhaps ousting the legitimate children from their inheritance (comp... Proverbs 17:2; and the ease of Ziba and Mephibosheth... 2 Samuel 16:4).” The proverb may be illustrated as a cuckoo’s egg in a bird’s nest. When the eggs hatch the young cuckoo will expel the other young birds from the nest. *The Commentary* concludes: “Spiritual writers have applied this proverb to the pampering of the flesh, which ought to be under the control of its master, the spirit, but which, if gratified and unrestrained, gets the upper hand, and, like a spoiled servant, dictates to its lord.”

In the end we find ourselves at loss as to the original intent of this proverb. Placed next to the one suggested above, “A wise servant will rule over a disgraceful son, and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers,”³ does not help to clarify whether the proverb speaks of a favorable condition or an unfavorable one.

1. John 8:34-36
2. Eccl. 5:2
3. Prov. 17:2

Jesus' words to His disciples: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made know to you"¹ may have been inspired by this proverb. If so, the statement is definitely very positive.

22 An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins.

23 A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.

24 The accomplice of a thief is his own enemy; he is put under oath and dare not testify.

25 Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.

V.22 is the twin of a previous proverb: "A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel."² The verse depicts the consequences of anger on the horizontal and vertical level. "Dissension" is the reaction of the people around the angry man; "sins" shows how God considers that person's flare-ups. As we saw earlier, the word *'aph*, "anger" refers to the nostrils and suggests rapid, feverish breathing. The topic of anger is dealt with extensively in *The Book of Proverbs*, mainly in the context of inter-human relations. This is the only verse that speaks about the consequences of anger in our relationship with God. In most cases *Proverbs* gives suggestion as to how to deal with angry people, either leaving them alone or calming them with soft answers and a kind attitude. The Apostle Peter suggests that a broken relationship in marriage will hinder a person's prayer.³ We could apply this principle to any human relationship that is marred by anger. Jesus put the priorities straight when He said: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."⁴

There is a connection between the anger in v.22 and the pride in v.23. The Hebrew word for "pride," *ga'avah*, has the negative and positive meaning of "arrogance" or "majesty." Since God created us in His image and likeness we do have reasons to be proud. Our human problem, however, is that sin causes us to be proud of the wrong things in life and to disregard those that pertain to our human dignity. The same could be said about the problem of anger in the previous verse. There are certain things in life that ought to kindle anger in us. Jesus' anger at the merchants in the temple court illustrates this. Many people get angry with others while they ought to be angry with themselves. In the same vein our wrongly directed pride will humiliate us on the Day of Judgment.

In the second clause the "lowly spirit" is placed in the context of our relationship with God. The Hebrew word for "lowly" is *shaphal*, literally meaning "depressed." This is the second time the word occurs in *The Book of Proverbs*. The first time is in the verse: "Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud."⁵ There the context is the horizontal relationship. In the proverb before us it refers to our relationship with God, as in the Psalm: "Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar."⁶ In human society humility does not bring one very far, but before God it is the basis upon which He bestows honor upon us. Since we will spend eternity in His presence (or without Him) and only few years on earth, it is what God does to us that counts.

V.24 is difficult to interpret. The Hebrew text reads literally: "Whoso is partner with a thief hates his own soul: he hears cursing and tells it not." The problem word is the Hebrew word *nagad* which means: "to stand boldly out" "to expose." The only other time the word is found in *The Book of Proverbs* is in "A

1. John 15:15
2. Prov 15:18
3. See I Peter 3:7.
4. Matt. 5:23,24
5. Prov. 16:19
6. Ps. 138:6

truthful witness gives honest *testimony*, but a false witness tells lies.”¹ *The King James Version*’s rendering of this verse is too archaic and no longer makes sense. *The New King James Version* reads: “Whoever is a partner with a thief hates his own life; He swears to tell the truth, but reveals nothing.” *The Revised Standard Version* reads: “The partner of a thief hates his own life; he hears the curse, but discloses nothing.” *The New Living Translation*: “If you assist a thief, you are only hurting yourself. You will be punished if you report the crime, but you will be cursed if you don’t.” *The Living Bible*: “A man who assists a thief must really hate himself! For he knows the consequence but does it anyway.” Finally, Eugene H. Peterson, in *Proverbs*, contributes this paraphrase: “Befriend an outlaw and become an enemy to yourself. When the victims cry out, you’ll be included in their curses if you’re a coward to their cause in court.”

The question is what do we do with a verse like this? The first obvious lesson is that people will judge us by the company we keep. In the first chapter of this book, the father warns his son against association with bad company.² In modern terms we could say that joining a gang is tantamount to committing suicide. As social beings we need approval of our fellowmen. Without a sense of belonging we become lonely and miserable. But sacrificing our integrity in order to feel accepted leads to disastrous consequences.

The Pulpit Commentary states about this proverb: “This refers to the course of proceeding defined by ... Leviticus 5:1, and intimated in ... Judges 17:2. When a theft was committed, the person wronged or the judge pronounced an imprecation on the thief and on any one who was privy to the crime, and refrained from giving information; a witness who saw and knew of it, and was silent under this formal adjuration, has to bear his iniquity; he is not only an accomplice of a criminal, he is also a perjurer; one sin leads to another. Some commentators explain the first hemistich as referring only to the crime of receiving or using stolen goods, by which a man commits a crime and exposes himself to punishment; but it is best taken, as above, in connection with the second clause, and as elucidated thereby.” The verses referred to above read: “If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible” and: “Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim said to his mother, ‘The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you and about which I heard you utter a curse — I have that silver with me; I took it.’ Then his mother said, ‘The LORD bless you, my son!’ ”

The second lesson is that holiness is not contagious but crime is. The prophet Haggai illustrated this principle with an object lesson. We read: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?’ The priests answered, ‘No.’ Then Haggai said, ‘If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?’ ‘Yes,’ the priests replied, ‘it becomes defiled.’ ”³

V.25 states the principle that governed the actions and reactions described in the three preceding verses. Whether we give in to peer pressure or to fear of death, whether we react with anger or by yielding, our fear runs in the wrong channel. Jesus says: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”⁴ In those words our problem is mostly with the killing of the body. The author of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* teaches that the solution of our fear of death is in the death of Jesus Christ. We read: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”⁵

1. Prov. 12:17
2. See Prov. 1:10-19.
3. Hag. 2:11-13
4. Matt. 10:28

Death is the last enemy, but he is a conquered foe. The fear of God, which is another caliber of fear than fear of man, will set life in the right perspective and help us to discern the pitfalls and dangers. David sings in one of his Psalms: "Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens. ... Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death."¹

26 Many seek an audience with a ruler, but it is from the LORD that man gets justice.

27 The righteous detest the dishonest; the wicked detest the upright.

V.26 is related to the previous verse in that it juxtaposes our inter-human relationships to our relationship with God. Here we see the other side of the coin, the positive face. The Hebrew word, rendered "audience" in *The New International Version*, is *panim*, which literally means "face." Some versions use the word "favor." Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, observes: "Favor is lit. 'face,' which suggests more graphically the competition for, and expectations from, the personal notice of the man who makes the decisions. Yet such men are themselves the servants of appetites and pressures (*cf.* Acts 24:25-27), irrationality (I Cor. 2:6,8) and instability (Ps. 146:3,4) which rob their interventions of all trustworthiness." The quoted verses read: "As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, 'That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.' At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison." And: "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." And finally: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God."² If we want real help we must go to the top, which is beyond the highest human authority.

The last verse places the two persons who were the subject of the whole chapter next to each other and compares their reaction to each other's presence. The Hebrew word rendered "detest" is *tow`ebah*, which literally means "abomination." The same word is used to describe the sentiment of both. The words are used as nouns, not as verbs. The text reads literally "hold in abomination." Yet, we understand that, in spite of the same wording, the sentiments of both parties toward each other are not identical. The just does not abhor the sinner in the same way as the unrighteous hates the righteous. An evil person takes offence at holiness in another person's life because he experiences it as a condemnation of his own lifestyle. He may wish hellfire and brimstone on the other. The righteous, however, must hate the sin and love the sinner. His abhorrence stems from his fellowship with God, Whom he sees insulted in the other person's life. David expresses this sentiment in one of his psalms: "Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies."³ This ambivalent comparison sums up the sentiment of the whole book.

V. The Words of Agur

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5. Heb. 2:14,15
 1. Ps. 68:19,20
 2. V.5 was added for good measure.
 3. Ps. 139:21,22

Chapter 30

1 Sayings of Agur

The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh — an oracle: This man declared to Ithiel, to Ithiel and to Ucal:

Chapter Thirty of *The Book of Proverbs* is from the hand of Agur, son of Jakeh, and the proverbs are addressed to Ithiel and to Ucal. Much has been written and speculated about the opening verses of this chapter. Most Bible scholars consider the name Agur to be symbolical, since the literal meaning of it is “collector.” Jakeh means “obedience.” Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, states about this person: “1 Kings 4:30,31 speaks of various sages besides Solomon. There is no need to find here (with Vulg.) a *nom-de-plume* for Solomon, requiring far-fetched interpretation.” The verses referred to, read: “Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite — wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations.”

The same commentary says about the chapter as a whole: “This chapter owes its vividness largely to the author’s profound humility, confessed in verses 1-9 and expressed both by his detestation of arrogance in all its forms and by his fascinated, candid observation of the world and its ways. In the groupings of men and creatures there is sometimes a moral or spiritual lesson stated or implied; but the lessons are nowhere pressed and the dominant attitude is that of keen and often delighted interest, inviting us to look again at our world with the eye of a man of faith who is an artist and an observer of character.”

A footnote in *The New International Version* states about the clause “to Ithiel and to Ucal,” “Masoretic Text; with a different word division of the Hebrew declared, ‘I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and faint.’ ” Some Bible scholars read this as: “I have wearied myself, O God, I have wearied myself, O God, and come to an end.”

After giving various examples of translations of this verse, *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “From this introduction, from the names here used, and from the style of the book, it appears evident that Solomon was not the author of this chapter; and that it was designed to be distinguished from his work by this very preface, which specifically distinguishes it from the preceding work. Nor can the words in Prov 30:2-3,8-9, be at all applied to Solomon: they suit no part of Solomon’s life, nor of his circumstances. We must, therefore, consider it an appendix or supplement to the preceding collection; something in the manner of that part which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, had collected. As to mysteries here, many have been found by them who sought for nothing else; but they are all, in my view of the subject, hazarded and precarious. I believe Agur, Jakeh, Ithiel, and Ucal, to be the names of persons who did exist, but of whom we know nothing but what is here mentioned. Agur seems to have been a public teacher, and Ithiel and Ucal to have been his scholars; and what he delivers to them was done by prophecy.”

The Pulpit Commentary adds: “Many have endeavored to find Agur’s nationality in the word that follows, translated ‘the prophecy’ *hamassa. Massa* ‘burden,’ is usually applied to a solemn prophetic speech or oracle, a Divine utterance ... and as this designation was deemed inappropriate to the character of this appendix, it has been thought that allusion is here made to a land of Massa, so called after a son of Ishmael (...Genesis 25:14), who dwelt in the country of Edom or Seir, and whose inhabitants were among those children of the East whose wisdom had become proverbial (...1 Kings 4:30).” The verses referred to read respectively: “These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, listed in the order of their birth: Nebaioth the firstborn of Ishmael, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa.”¹ And: “Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt.”

In the general introduction to *The Book of Proverbs* in his commentary *Proverbs*, Derek Kidner states about Chapters 30 and 31, that they “are both from non-Israelites, perhaps Arabians from Massa ...

1. I added v.13 for clarity sake.

The language of 30:4 and the spelling of the word for God in 30:5 are reminiscent of the book of Job, which is set in the same region.”

2 "I am the most ignorant of men; I do not have a man's understanding.

3 I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.

4 Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands? Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and the name of his son? Tell me if you know!

The Hebrew text of vv.2 and 3 reads literally: “Surely, I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man.” The Living Bible over-dramatizes this with: “I am too stupid even to call myself a human being! I cannot understand man, let alone God.”

Agur shows great wisdom in this fascinating opening statement. It takes wisdom to recognize one's limitations. In principle, Agur says what Solomon declared in the beginning of this book: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.”¹ What this man says is that the deeper he penetrates in the mystery of wisdom, the more he realizes how little he knows. There may be a touch of irony in Agur's words, but that does not diminish the depth of his understanding. It remains true that the closer we get to God the more incomprehensible He becomes. The Apostle Paul states that it takes all the saints together “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”²

The Septuagint gives us a different reading of v.3: “God has taught me wisdom, and the knowledge of the saints I have known.”

It is difficult to read v.4 without being intrigued by the allusion to other portions of Scripture that use the same wording. The verse sounds almost like a direct quotation of the words of Moses: “Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”³ Even more intriguing is the mention of the son's name in connection with going to heaven and coming down, especially if we place this next to Jesus' statement: “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man.”⁴ It is obvious that Agur could not have had the incarnation in mind when he said this, but the Holy Spirit knew what He inspired Agur to say.

The words also remind us of what Isaiah would proclaim centuries later: “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?”⁵

Compared to this God and His wisdom, every human being is most ignorant and devoid of wisdom. In a way Agur reminds us of the fact that we are all created in God's image and likeness and have strayed away so far from God's image that it is barely recognizable.

5 "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

6 Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

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1. Prov. 1:7
 2. Eph. 3:18,19
 3. Deut. 30:11-14
 4. John 3:13
 5. Isa. 40:12

We would expect to find v.5 in *The Book of Psalms*, rather than in *The Book of Proverbs*. As a matter of fact we do find similar statements about the Word of God and about God being a shield in the Psalms. “And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.”¹ “For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.”² And “But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.”³ “The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.”⁴

The Hebrew word for “word” is here *imrah*, which means primarily “commandment.” This is the only place in *The Book of Proverbs* where this word is used. It is one of the keywords in Psalm One Hundred Nineteen, where it is used nineteen times. It also has the connotation of “promise” as in the verse: “Nevertheless, for the sake of his servant David, the LORD was not willing to destroy Judah. He had *promised* to maintain a lamp for David and his descendants forever.”⁵

What Agur seems to be saying is that if we take God’s Word, God’s promise, seriously, God will take us seriously and hold His shield of protection over us. Agur’s words remind us of Paul’s statement: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.”⁶ *The Septuagint* renders this verse: “All the words of God are tried in the fire.” God has no need to try His own Word in order to assure its purity. It is in the fire of our trials that God’s Word and promises prove to be a stronghold and protection. Any addition to God’s Word would mean adding a foreign substance to it, which pollutes the gold. The statement reminds us of the last warning in Revelation: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”⁷ The Apostle Paul exclaims: “Let God be true, and every man a liar.”⁸

7 "Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die:

8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.

9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.

David asked God for one thing: “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”⁹ Agur asks for two: Make me honest and do not lead me into temptation. David’s and Agur’s desire are related. Agur may sound more down to earth than David, more realistic. But without a concept of the beauty of the Lord, the desire for honesty and the understanding of the dangers of undermining integrity could not have risen in Agur’s heart.

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1. Ps. 12:6
 2. Ps. 66:10
 3. Ps. 3:3
 4. Ps. 28:7
 5. II Kings 8:19
 6. II Cor. 1:20
 7. Rev. 22:18,19
 8. Rom. 3:4
 9. Ps. 27:4

The Hebrew in v.8 reads literally: “Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me.” The Hebrew word for “vanity” is *shav*, meaning “ruin” or “guile.” We find it in the commandment: “You shall not *take* the name of the LORD your God *in vain*, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who *takes* His name *in vain*.”¹

It takes self-knowledge and humility to pray such a prayer. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments: “The two requests which converge on one goal, concern (a) character (8a), and (b) the circumstances that endanger character (8b,c,9). The prayer confirms the humility professed in verses 2ff., and unfolds it as (a) humility of ambition (a longing – *before I die* – for godly integrity, not for ‘great things for (him)self’), and (b) humility of self-knowledge – for ... he might have prayed to use poverty or riches rightly, but knows his frailty too well.”

Rarely human frailty is so well expressed and so uncompromisingly exposed as in these verses. It is relatively easy to say things like these about mankind in general, but it is difficult to confess about yourself that you cannot be trusted. Agur’s prayer sounds like the opposite of Jabez’ prayer: “‘Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.’ And God granted his request.”² We tend to lean more in the direction of Jabez than of Agur. Most people are afraid of poverty but they do not mind becoming rich. Rarely do people ask God to keep them from either. Agur did not trust himself but he trusted the Lord. Lord Acton said that power corrupts. He could have said that riches corrupt also. When we become poor, we usually believe it is not our own fault; when we get rich we take the credit for it. Jabez may have recognized God’s hand in his affluence; most people do not.

10 "Do not slander a servant to his master, or he will curse you, and you will pay for it.

11 "There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers;

12 those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth;

13 those whose eyes are ever so haughty, whose glances are so disdainful;

14 those whose teeth are swords and whose jaws are set with knives to devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind.

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, gives to these verses the heading: “Four facets of arrogance.” He comments: “The Heb. has no *there is* ...; only a set of snapshots placed before the reader without comment, to display, full-grown, the arrogance prayed against in 7-9. There may be a sequence traceable from impious childhood (11) to practiced brutality (14); at all events pride is seen corrupting a person’s attitude to his superiors (11), himself (12), the world at large (13), and his supposed inferiors (14).”

The Hebrew word rendered “slander” in v.10 is *lashan*, which literally means “to lick.” It is often used in the sense of “to wag the tongue,” hence the meaning “slander.” This is the only place in *The Book of Proverbs* where the verb is used. Some Bible scholars read this: “Do not make a servant accuse his master...” *The Septuagint* renders the verse: “Do not deliver a servant in the hands of his master,” which, as *The Pulpit Commentary* observes, would refer to the treatment of a runaway slave. The Law of Moses provided for such a situation. We read: “If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master. Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses. Do not oppress him.”³ The gist of the proverb seems to be that we be compassionate with those who are underprivileged. The proverb throws an interesting light on Paul’s letter to Philemon, which Paul sent with the runaway slave Onesimus.

1. Ex. 20:7 (NKJV)

2. I Chron. 4:10

3. Deut. 23:15,16

We must remember the cultural setting against which this proverb is placed. The Israelites were not supposed to keep slaves in the way the gentiles did. The Hebrew slave was someone who worked to pay off his debt, not someone who could be sold as merchandise. There is an implicit condemnation against slavery in this proverb. The text also does not suggest that sin should be condoned. The accusation brought is false and slanderous.

Most modern translations and paraphrases take the verse out of the context of slavery. *The New Living Translation* reads: “Never slander a person to his employer. If you do, the person will curse you, and you will pay for it.” *The Living Bible*: “Never falsely accuse a man to his employer, lest he curse you for your sin.” Eugene Peterson, in *Proverbs*: “Don’t blow the whistle on your fellow workers behind their backs; They’ll accuse you of being underhanded, and then you’ll be the guilty one!” Taking the curse out of the verse, as the paraphrases do, takes the sting out of it. The curse may be the only weapon the accused has. By using it, he hands his opponent over to the enemy of his soul. The underlying thought seems to be that since slander comes from the devil, the devil will pay him who indulges in it.

Actually, the Hebrew word *qalal*, which is rendered “to curse” both in vv. 10 and 11, is less severe in Hebrew than in English. The literal meaning is “to make light of,” or “to lower.” We find it in the verse about Noah and the flood: “Then he sent out a dove to see if the water *had receded* from the surface of the ground.”¹ And in the story of Hagar and Sarah: “When she knew she was pregnant, she began to *despise* her mistress.”² Elsewhere in *The Book of Proverbs* it is used as “easy” as in the verse: “The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none, but knowledge *comes easily* to the discerning.”³

It will help to bear this in mind in reading v.11 about cursing one’s father. We find a similar thought in a previous proverb: “If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness.”⁴ These proverbs do not suggest that an actual curse was pronounced, but that the command to honor one’s father and mother was not obeyed. The Hebrew text of v.11 reads literally: “[There is] a generation [that] curses their father and does not bless their mother.” “Curse” and “does not bless” are poetical parallels.

In accusing the Pharisees of hypocrisy, Jesus showed how practical honoring parents ought to be. He said: “God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honor his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.”⁵ There is a strong suggestion in Jesus’ words that he who does not honor his father or mother does not honor God either. Failing to bless is tantamount to cursing. We are commanded to honor our parents because they are God’s instruments of creation. Without them we would not exist. Failing to recognize that we owe our life to our parents and that subsequently we owe them honor, means failing to recognize God as our Creator whom we are obliged to praise.

In our world filled with dysfunctional families and broken homes, this proverb sounds like a scathing condemnation. “There is a generation...” The Apostle Paul cites this generation as an indication of the end time. He writes to Timothy: “But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good,

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1. Gen. 8:8
 2. Gen. 16:4
 3. Prov. 14:6
 4. Prov. 20:20
 5. Matt. 15:4-6

treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.”¹

The Hebrew sentence construction of v.12 is the same as in the previous proverb: “[There is] a generation...” The Hebrew word rendered “filth” is *tsow’ah*, which has the primary meaning of “excrement.” The use of this particular word suggests that the pollution of the person is obvious to everybody, except to the person himself. This man demonstrates a complete lack of self-knowledge; he is completely blind to his own shortcomings. Jesus reproached the church in Laodicea: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”²

One wonders how a human being can be in such a condition in which that which is repulsive as excrements no longer seems disgusting. If we keep God out of the picture we no longer have any means of evaluation of character. Being created in the image of God, we must compare ourselves with the original in order to see where we have deviated. The essence of judgment on the Day of Judgment will be that we will see ourselves placed next to the glory of God and discover our true condition. The Apostle Paul explains in his epistles the role of the law in convicting us of sin. He writes: “I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.”³ Only the Holy Spirit can convict us of sin and bring us to the place where we recognize sin as sin, excrements as excrements.

This proverb does not stop at the place of condemnation; the second clause suggests cleansing. As we clean ourselves in the natural, so can we be cleansed morally and spiritually. The person who is the subject of this proverb emits a foul odor because he has refused to be cleansed. This suggests, however, that cleansing is an option for all. The Bible states that Jesus “loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood.”⁴ And the Apostle Paul writes that: “We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”⁵ If God smells the aroma of Christ in us, others will too.

The Hebrew text of v.13 is more picturesque than our English rendering: “[There is] a generation o how lofty are their eyes! and their eyelids are lifted up.” The words drip with irony! *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* comments here: “He speaks of them with amazement at their intolerable pride and insolence: ‘Oh how lofty are their eyes! With what disdain do they look upon their neighbors, as not worthy to be set with the dogs of their flock! What a distance do they expect every body should keep; and, when they look upon themselves, how do they strut and vaunt like the peacock, thinking they make themselves illustrious when really they make themselves ridiculous!’ There is a generation of such, on whom he that resists the proud will pour contempt.”

Rarely has a generation of oppressors been so mercilessly been exposed as in v.14 of this chapter. “[There is] a generation whose teeth are as swords, and their jaw teeth [as] knives to devour the poor from off the earth, and the needy from among men.” Man surpasses any wild animal in this description. The image of the Creator is completely lost in this picture of man. Any trace of love for the neighbor is missing. Man has turned into a predator; his model has become Satan, the murderer of man.

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1. II Tim. 3:1-5
 2. Rev. 3:17
 3. Rom. 7:10-13
 4. Rev. 1:5 (NKJV)
 5. II Cor. 2:15

15 "The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry. "There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!':

16 the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, 'Enough!'

The words "there are three things ... four" are evidently a Hebrew idiom for "there are some things." The prophet Amos used the idiom in his condemnation of Israel and the surrounding nations.¹

Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, comments on these verses: "The man of measureless ambition loses whatever luster remains to him after verse 14, in this hungry company. The implied comparison is first comic, then tragic. 'Give! Give!' can be taken as the names – with more pointed wit than as the cries – of the identical twins, who are made of the same stuff as their mother – other people's blood. But verse 16 leaves comedy behind, to reveal this craving as at once menacing (Sheol and fire) and pathetic (the childless and the parched), and the reader of the two verses is left with mingled repulsion, fear and pity for human cupidity."

This is the only place in Scripture where the word "leech," Hebrew *aluwqah* for "to suck," is found. It seems that sin has done its perfect work in humanity. There may be some fascination for us in the picture of a shark or a tiger, but the leech only invokes revulsion in us. The insatiable hunger and thirst depicted in these verses is hell at its worst. Yet, these verses give a description of human cupidity, not of demons. They depict what man, the crown of God's creation has become in his separation from God. Adam and Eve lost their innocence when they committed a sin that may have seemed trivial. After all, what harm is there in picking a fruit from a tree that had been declared off limit? V.16 reveals the end of the road. The result of a fall is determined by its height. Falling three feet may have painful consequences, falling three thousand feet is fatal. When Adam and Eve fell, they lost more than their innocence, they lost their crown and everything it represented.

The leech's daughters "Give! Give!" consider themselves to be the center of the universe, the most important of all God's creatures. The satisfaction of their needs and desires is the most important of all things and requires priority over all else. Separation from God means severance from all means of satisfaction. Only the Creator can satisfy our deepest longings. He alone can fill the emptiness in the heart He created. The Incarnation shows us that ultimate satisfaction consists not in receiving but in giving. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."² If we insist on being on the receiving end we will end up becoming fodder for the grave and the fire. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."³

17 "The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures.

This proverb takes the lesson of a previous proverb to its ultimate conclusion. We read earlier: "If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness."⁴ The graphic description of the second proverb is obviously intended to create in us the same revulsion as the previous one about the leeches. This is done for the purpose of keeping us from the sin of disobeying the commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."⁵

1. See Amos 1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,6.
2. Mark 10:45
3. Matt. 16:25
4. Prov. 20:20
5. Ex. 20:12

There is no reason to interpret this as occurring to a living person. It probably depicts the scene of a battlefield on which the vultures feast on the bodies of the slain. In his movie *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson applies this proverb to the murderer who was crucified with Christ and mocked Him. Although the Gospel record of the crucifixion provides no ground for such a scene, the point is well taken that disrespect for parents can be traced to contempt for the Creator. This proverb goes beyond disobedience to mockery and scorn, which were manifested in abundance during the crucifixion of the Lord of glory. Those who fail to recognize their Creator will have no eye for the mystery of procreation either. As this proverb suggests, “no eye” may be taken literally.

18 "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand:

19 the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden.

We find in v.18 the same idiomatic formula (there are three things ... four) as in v.15. The Hebrew text of v.18 reads literally: “There [be] three [things which are] too wonderful for me, yea four which I know not ...”

Bible scholars have argued about the common denominator in the four pictures of the eagle, the snake, the ship, and the maiden, without being able to come to an agreement. The three pictures seem to lead up to the fourth. It suggests that Agur had detected the first stirrings of love for a girl in his heart and asks himself the question, what is happening to me? Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, adds a fifth mystery to these four by drawing the adulteress of v.20 into the series as another inexplicable phenomenon.

Some of the things that were a mystery to Agur are no longer to us. Modern man has discovered the mystery of flight and mastered the laws of aerodynamics and gravity to the point where airplanes fly and rockets go into space. Biologists know that snakes can move without the use of legs. The invention of the compass allows ships to cross oceans. But “the way of a man with a maiden” is still as great a mystery to us as it was to people at the beginning of time. When Adam saw Eve for the first time in his life and exclaimed: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man,”¹ he came no closer to solving the mystery as did Agur or we do. What causes the opposite sexes to fall in love? Only God knows and He has not told anybody yet.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary gives quite a different interpretation of this proverb, linking it to the next one as an example of a sinful relationship. We read: “The cursed arts which a vile adulterer has to debauch a maid, and to persuade her to yield to his wicked and abominable lust. This is what a wanton poet wrote a whole book of, long since, *De arte amandi*-On the art of love. By what pretensions and protestations of love, and all its powerful charms, promises of marriage, assurances of secrecy and reward, is many an unwary virgin brought to sell her virtue, and honor, and peace, and soul, and all to a base traitor; for so all sinful lust is in the kingdom of love. The more artfully the temptation is managed the more watchful and resolute ought every pure heart to be against it.” The same *Commentary* interprets the secret of all the examples given by saying that none of them leave a trace behind.

The Pulpit Commentary adds here: “Some of the Fathers and earlier commentators, and among moderns, Bishop Wordsworth, have not been content with the literal sense of this gnomic, but have found in it, as in the others, deep spiritual mysteries. Christ is the great Eagle (...Revelation 12:14), who ascended beyond human ken; the serpent is the devil, who works his wily way in secret, and who tried to pass into the mind of Christ, who is the Rock; the ship is the Church, which preserves its course amid the waves of this troublesome world, though we cannot mark its strength or whither it is guided; and the fourth mystery is the incarnation of Jesus Christ our Lord, when ‘the virgin (*almah*) conceived and bare a son’ (...Isaiah 7:14), when ‘a woman encompassed a man (*geber*)’ (...Jeremiah 31:22). We can see the greater or less

1. Gen. 2:23

appropriateness of such accommodation, but the proverb must have been received by contemporaries only in its literal sense, whatever were the inner mysteries which the Holy Spirit wished to communicate thereby.”

20 "This is the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, 'I've done nothing wrong.'

21 "Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up:

22 a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food,

23 an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.

Maybe v.20 ought to be joined to the previous section because it depicts a woman who denies the mystery of love and degrades it to a mere sexual relationship. The obvious point Agur makes in this proverb is that adultery is wrong, regardless of what we say. This verse makes the double statement that sex outside the bonds of marriage is sin and that sex without love is also. Although only the woman is mentioned in this verse, the male partner stands condemned at the same time.

About this proverb, *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments: “The cursed arts which a vile adulteress has to conceal her wickedness, especially from her husband, from whom she treacherously departs; so close are her intrigues with her lewd companions, and so craftily disguised, that it is as impossible to discover her as to track an eagle in the air. She eats the forbidden fruit, after the similitude of Adam’s transgression, and then wipes her mouth, that it may not betray itself, and with a bold and impudent face says, I have done no wickedness. ... To the world she denies the fact, and is ready to swear it that she is as chaste and modest as any woman, and never did the wickedness she is suspected of. Those are the works of darkness which are industriously kept from coming to the light. ... To her own conscience (if she have any left) she denies the fault, and will not own that that great wickedness is any wickedness at all, but an innocent entertainment. ... Thus multitudes ruin their souls by calling evil good and out-facing their convictions with a self-justification.”

The Hebrew of v.21 reads literally: “For three [things] the earth is disquieted, and for four [which] it cannot bear...” The Hebrew word rendered “disquieted” (“trembles” in *The New International Version*) is *ragaz*, which means literally “to quiver with any violent emotion,” or “to be angry,” or “to fear.” We find it in Joseph’s words to his brothers. We read: “Then he sent his brothers away, and as they were leaving he said to them, ‘Don’t quarrel on the way!’”¹

Although Agur seems to build up his statements to a climax, the example he gives in vv. 22 and 23 do not sound as earthshaking to us as he wants them to appear. The common element in these four vignettes seems to be the reaction of the individuals to whom this happens. A slave is not meant to be a king; a fool ought not to become affluent, a disagreeable and unpleasant girl is not supposed to get a husband, and a slave girl ought not to inherit her mistress’s fortune. Their natural condition does not qualify them to their promotion, and, consequently, their success goes to their head. But if such things do happen, we ask what is so earth-shattering about them?

The Pulpit Commentary observes, first of all, that two of the characters are two men and two women. *The Commentary* proceeds to state: “These four evils destroy the comfort of social life, uproot the bonds of society, and endanger the safety of a nation.” The main thought in these verses seems to be that, although natural conditions and conventions do not allow these things to happen, although they do not meet with public approval, they do happen. Public opinion seems to be the main issue here. The changes in society that are brought about by the rising to the top of people who, in the public eye, ought to remain below, raises the question in the public mind of “What is this world coming to?” Maybe the best interpretation of these verses is to see them as a sample of irony. Agur may be mocking public opinion more than breaking convention. The pecking order in society is manmade and artificial. Upsetting the order is not necessarily evil or earthshaking.

1. Gen. 45:24

**24 "Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise:
25 Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer;
26 coney are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags;
27 locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks;
28 a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces.**

The first truth that seems to link these five proverbs together seems to be that bigger is not always better. Agur presents us four small creatures: the ant, the coney, the locust, and the lizard. Some are smaller than others. What they have in common is not size but smarts. The ants prove their wisdom in the recognition of their need and of the time in which to provide for the future. The coney masters the art of survival. The locusts excel in their organizational talents and the lizard by being unstoppable. In a way the ants parallel the locusts in terms of organization and the coney compares to the lizard in terms of habitat. The wisdom of these little creatures demonstrates itself in the way they handle their natural disadvantage. As such they are made an example for us.

We are most familiar with three of the four species mentioned. The rare one is the coney, *shaphan* in Hebrew. *Strong's Hebrew Dictionary* calls him "a species of rock-rabbit ... probably the hyrax." *The American Peoples' Encyclopedia* states about the hyrax: "Early naturalists considered these animals to be rodents because of a superficial resemblance to rabbits and the presence of prominent incisor teeth. The cheek teeth and peculiar three-toed hind feet indicate relationship to the hoofed mammals. ... The coney of the Bible was undoubtedly the Syrian species."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary devotes the most extensive comments to these verses, which we copy here: "Four things little and wise

I. Agur, having specified four things that seem great and yet are really contemptible, here specifies four things that are little and yet are very admirable, great in miniature, in which, as bishop Patrick observes, he teaches us several good lessons: as,

1. Not to admire bodily bulk, or beauty, or strength, nor to value persons or think the better of them for such advantages, but to judge of men by their wisdom and conduct, their industry and application to business, which are characters that deserve respect.

2. To admire the wisdom and power of the Creator in the smallest and most despicable animals, in an ant as much as in an elephant.

3. To blame ourselves who do not act so much for our own true interest as the meanest creatures do for theirs.

4. Not to despise the weak things of the world; there are those that are little upon the earth, poor in the world and of small account, and yet are exceedingly wise, wise for their souls and another world, and those are exceedingly wise, wiser than their neighbors. ... They are wise, made wise by the special instinct of nature. All that are wise to salvation are made wise by the grace of God.

II. Those he specifies are,

1. The ants, minute animals and very weak, and yet they are very industrious in gathering proper food, and have a strange sagacity to do it in the summer, the proper time. This is so great a piece of wisdom that we may learn of them to be wise for futurity, Prov 6:6. When the ravening lions lack, and suffer hunger, the laborious ants have plenty, and know no want.

2. The coney, or, as some rather understand it, the Arabian mice, field mice, weak creatures, and very timorous, yet they have so much wisdom as to make their houses in the rocks, where they are well guarded, and their feebleness makes them take shelter in those natural fastnesses and fortifications. Sense of our own indigence and weakness should drive us to him that is a rock higher than we for shelter and support; there let us make our habitation.

3. The locusts; they are little also, and have no king, as the bees have, but they go forth all of them by bands, like an army in battle-array; and, observing such good order among themselves, it is not any inconvenience to them that they have no king. They are called God's great army (Joel 2:25); for, when he

pleases, he musters, he marshals them, and wages war by them, as he did upon Egypt. They go forth all of them gathered together (so the margin); sense of weakness should engage us to keep together, that we may strengthen the hands of one another.

4. The spider,¹ an insect, but as great an instance of industry in our houses as the ants are in the field. Spiders are very ingenious in weaving their webs with a fineness and exactness such as no art can pretend to come near: They take hold with their hands, and spin a fine thread out of their own bowels, with a great deal of art; and they are not only in poor men's cottages, but in kings' palaces, notwithstanding all the care that is there taken to destroy them. Providence wonderfully keeps up those kinds of creatures, not only which men provide not for, but which every man's hand is against and seeks the destruction of. Those that will mind their business, and take hold of it with their hands, shall be in kings' palaces; sooner or later, they will get preferment, and may go on with it, notwithstanding the difficulties and discouragements they meet with. If one well-spun web be swept away, it is but making another."

The Pulpit Commentary observes about the wisdom of these creatures: "The Septuagint and Vulgate translate in the comparatives. 'These are wiser than the wise,' the instincts of these animals being more marvelous than human wisdom." *The Commentary* states about the coney: "It lives in companies, and chooses a ready-made cleft in the rocks for its home, so that, though the conies are but a 'feeble folk,' their refuge in the rocks gives them a security beyond that of stronger creatures. They are, moreover, 'exceeding wise,' so that it is very hard to capture one. Indeed, they are said, on high authority, to have sentries regularly placed on the look out while the rest are feeding; a squeak from the watchman sufficing to send the flock scudding to their holes like rabbits."

29 "There are three things that are stately in their stride, four that move with stately bearing:

30 a lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing;

31 a strutting rooster, a he-goat, and a king with his army around him.

It seems that Agur's irony is most prominent in this last vignette of the series. We may be impressed and in awe about the way the lion strides, but the strutting rooster, the billy goat tend to amuse us. The fact that the king closes the procession makes him look rather ridiculous by comparison.

There are some words in the Hebrew text that are difficult to decipher and have led to different interpretations. *The King James Version* and *The New King James Version* render *zarzir mothnayim* "greyhound." The newer versions take it to be a rooster. And "a king with his army around him" is interpreted by some as "a king secure against revolt."²

Most commentators, however, do not believe the text ridicules any of the Lord's creatures. *The Pulpit Commentary*, for instance, observes: "This passage, again, has been taken in a spiritual sense as referring to Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Warrior girt with the sword, the Leader of the flock, the King of kings." But a slightly mocking tone would form a logical bridge to the last two verses of Agur's wisdom.

32 "If you have played the fool and exalted yourself, or if you have planned evil, clap your hand over your mouth!

33 For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife."

1. The older versions translate the Hebrew *semamiyth* "spider," the more modern ones believe it to be the lizard.

2. See footnote in the NIV.

These last verses call for some self-criticism by pointing out that the outcome of foolishness is strife. Derek Kidner, in *Proverbs*, calls these verses “A concluding call to humility.” He states: “Humility, the undercurrent of this chapter, which has already commended itself (directly or by contrast) as reverence (1-9), restraint (10-17) and wonder (18-31), is finally manifested as peaceable behavior (32,33).”

The culprit in these verses is the spoken word. The quarrel begins when someone says the wrong thing. And the wrong thing is said by the person who believes to be important enough to say whatever he wants. The Hebrew text uses “fool” as a verb, not as a noun. “Have played the fool” is the rendering of the Hebrew “done foolishly.” The action described is not innocently showing off, but evil intent. What Agur seems to say here is that what begins as an innocent looking joke may turn out much worse than intended. Commenting on the first case “if you have played the fool and exalted yourself,” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “And who has not, at one time or other of his life?” *Barnes’ Notes* points out: “[Churning ... wringing ... forcing] In the Hebrew text it is one and the same word. ‘The pressure of milk produces curds, the pressure of the nose produces blood, the pressure of wrath (i.e., brooding over and, as it were, condensing it) produces strife.’ ”

The Pulpit Commentary states: “St. Gregory ... applies the Vulgate rendering to antichrist, ‘For he in truth will be lifted up on high, when he will feign that he is God. But he will appear a fool when lifted up on high, because he will fail in his very loftiness through the coming of the true Judge. But if he had understood this, he would have laid his hand on his mouth; that is, if he had foreseen his punishment, when he began to be proud, having been once fashioned aright, he would not have been raised up to the boastfulness of such great pride.’ ” We could add here the Apostle John’s observation: “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.”¹

If we want to know what spirit inspires our speech we must look at the results. If the outcome of our words is strife and quarrel, they may come from the one who is the speechwriter of the Antichrist. James warns us that “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”² If, however, we are led by the Holy Spirit we will speak the wisdom of heaven of which James says: “the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”³

VI. The Words of King Lemuel

Chapter 31

A. Wisdom for Leaders 31:1-9

1 The sayings of King Lemuel — an oracle his mother taught him:

2 "O my son, O son of my womb, O son of my vows,

3 do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings.

4 "It is not for kings, O Lemuel — not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer,

5 lest they drink and forget what the law decrees, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.

6 Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish;

7 let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.

8 "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.

9 Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

1. I John 2:18
2. James 3:6
3. James 3:17,18

Nothing is known about King Lemuel. His name means “Belonging to God.” Some Bible scholars believe that this is a nom-de-plume. Others identify him as “king of Massa.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: “Instead of translating the word after this name as ‘oracle’ some propose to leave it as a proper name, translating ‘king of Massa,’ and referring for his kingdom to Massa (Gen 25:14), one of the sons of Ishmael, supposedly head of a tribe or sheikh of a country. It is to be noted, however, that the words of Agur in the previous chapter are similarly called massa’, ‘oracle’ with not so clear a reason for referring it to a country.”

The text strongly suggests that Lemuel was a king. This chapter forms a well-balanced conclusion to *The Book of Proverbs*. The book began with the words of a father to his son; it ends with a mother’s advice and with the son’s praise for his wife.

The Hebrew of v.2 is more picturesque than the English text. The older versions render the unanswered question literally: “What, my son? And what, son of my womb? And what, son of my vows?” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* probably has the best interpretation of the text: “And what. The thrice-repeated interrogation implies the strength of the mother’s feelings: What am I to say to thee? With what precepts can I sufficiently instruct thee, so that thou mayest be truly wise and happy as a king? Words fail to express all I feel in respect to thee.” It is true that no child can understand a mother’s love. It is not until the child grows up and has children and experiences the same emotions regarding his or her child that the appreciation for the mother’s love is appreciated fully.

A footnote in *The New International Version* states the alternate translation of “son of my vows” as “the answer to my prayers.” Lemuel’s mother’s words remind us of Hannah’s vows when she prayed God for a son: “O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.”¹ The advice of the mother must be seen against the background of the vow she made concerning her son. She bore him but he belongs to the Lord, as his name indicates. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on “Son of my vows”: “This might mean, ‘son who was asked in prayer,’ like Samuel (...1 Samuel 1:11), and dedicated to God, as the name Lemuel implies; or it may signify, ‘thou who art the object of my daily vows and prayers.’ ”

Divine wisdom is the only protection against temptation. This mother’s words echo the father’s warning to his son of the dangers of adultery. We read earlier: “It will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words, who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God. For her house leads down to death and her paths to the spirits of the dead. None who go to her return or attain the paths of life.”²

Although sexual sin is often used in Scripture as a figure of a broken relationship with God, it is also a very powerful temptation for any young man facing life. Inasmuch as we are called to reign with Christ, the advice the mother gives to her son is important for us also. We do well to look beyond the topics of sex and alcohol to anything that endangers the purity and sobriety of our dedication to the Lord. The Apostle John uses the same language to describe those who are with Jesus in heaven, indicating what sanctification means. We read: “These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.”³

The following is not necessarily a divine endorsement of abstinence, although some Bible scholars interpret it that way. The general warning of Scripture is against drunkenness.

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1. I Sam. 1:11
 2. Prov. 2:16-19
 3. Rev. 14:4,5

The Pulpit Commentary states about inebriety: “The evils of intemperance, flagrant enough in the case of a private person, are greatly enhanced in the case of a king, whose misdeeds may affect a whole community, as the next verse intimates. St. Jerome reads differently, translating, ‘Because there is no secret where drunkenness reigns.’ This is in accordance with the proverb, ‘When wine goes in the secret comes out;’ and, ‘Where drink enters, wisdom departs;’ ... Septuagint, ‘The powerful are irascible, but let them not drink wine.’ ‘Drunkenness,’ says Jeremy Taylor ... ‘opens all the sanctuaries of nature, and discovers the nakedness of the soul, all its weaknesses and follies; it multiplies sins and discovers them; it makes a man incapable of being a private friend or a public counselor. It takes a man’s soul into slavery and imprisonment more than any vice whatsoever, because it disarms a man of all his reason and his wisdom, whereby he might be cured, and, therefore, commonly it grows upon him with age; a drunkard being still more a fool and less a man.’ ”

It is difficult, however, to circumvent the apparent endorsement of the use of alcohol in vv. 6 and 7. The Old Testament does not advocate abstinence, as is obvious from the way the Psalmist describes it as: “wine that gladdens the heart of man...”¹ *The Book of Proverbs* warns against indulgence in the use of alcohol. We read: “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.”² And “Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.”³ The advice of Lemuel’s mother, therefore, strikes us as a contradiction. Some Bible scholars refer to the habit that wine was given to those who were going to be executed, as reported in Jesus’ crucifixion.⁴ “Those who are perishing” could be seen as belonging in that category. But “let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more” clearly speaks of circumstances that drive people into alcoholism, not of people who are facing capital punishment. There is no record in the Old Testament of people who were given alcohol before being stoned to death, which was the known form of execution. Drinking to forget cannot be classified as moderate use of alcohol. Some Bible scholars see this as a cynical piece of advice, which may be the easier way of interpreting the problem. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* believes it to be “a comparative negative” as in a previous proverb: “Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold...”⁵

The intent of the mother’s word is probably to impress upon her son that whatever others do, a king cannot afford to stoop to that level. Using alcohol as an antidote to the pressures of the high office is not an option for a king.

The problem with alcohol is that when the effect wears off, the problem is still there. But if the king becomes the spokesman for the destitute, as vv. 8 and 9 suggest, burdens are lifted.

B. Wise Woman 31:10-31

10 A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

11 Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.

12 She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.

13 She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.

14 She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.

15 She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.

1. Ps. 104:15

2. Prov. 20:1

3. Prov. 23:20,21

4. See Mark 15:23.

5. Prov. 8:10

16 She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
17 She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.
18 She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.
19 In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.
20 She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.
21 When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.
22 She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.
23 Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.
24 She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.
25 She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.
26 She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
27 She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.
28 Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:
29 "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."
30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
31 Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

This brings us to the epilogue of *The Book of Proverbs*. This is the kind of song preachers preach about on Mother's Day. The structure of the poem is unusual in the context of the book in that it is an acrostic: each verse begins with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, arranged in the usual order.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "One object of this artificial construction was to render the matter easier to commit to memory. The spiritual expositors see in this description of the virtuous woman a prophetic representation of the Church of Christ in her truth and purity and influence."

The topic is "The Virtuous Woman." *The Nelson Study Bible* states about this section: "Some have thought that it continues the teaching of King Lemuel's mother (vv. 1-9), but it may also be an independent, concluding unit. As *The Book of Proverbs* begins with the Prologue (1:1-7), which gives the goals of wisdom in general terms, so now it concludes with this Epilogue (vv. 10-31), which presents them in a case study."

The Hebrew word, rendered in *The New International Version* "of noble character" is *chayil*. The prime meaning of the word is "force." It is variously translated: "wealth, virtue, valor," or "strength." The question "who can find?" suggests a rare quality. These verses may be called "an ode to the ideal housewife." *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: "The expression combines the ideas of moral goodness and bodily vigor and activity. It is useless to try to fix the character upon any particular person. The representation is that of an ideal woman — the perfect housewife, the chaste helpmate of her husband, upright, God fearing, economical, wise."

What is lacking in these verses is any reference to love or romance in the marriage relationship. This woman is efficient and hardworking. She makes her husband respectable (v.23). To put this in modern terms, she is more feminist than feminine. A man looking at this portrait, could ask himself the question, "Would I want to be married to this girl?" and probably answer in the negative. This, however, should not make us jump to conclusions. This is not the only picture the Bible draws of marital bliss. The Song of Songs provides us with a very good balance to this "lady of the house." The ideal wife is probably a combination of the two odes.

The most outstanding characteristic of this lady is that she fears the Lord (v.30). Thus she keeps the family together.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary outlines this section as follows: "From this [v.10] to the end of the chapter we have the character of a woman of genuine worth laid down; first, in general, Prov 31:10-12; secondly, in its particular or component parts, Prov 31:13-29; and, thirdly, the summing up of the character, Prov 31:30-31."

Following Adam Clarke's outline, we see first the general statement – vv.10-12:

Seen in the context of the times, the reference to rubies probably speaks of the bride price a young man would have to pay for the girl he wants to marry. The Hebrew word, rendered “ruby” is *paniyn*, which can also mean “a pearl.” *The Revised Standard Version* reads: “She is far more precious than jewels.” The word *paniyn* is found in three other proverbs in this book, every time in connection with wisdom. We read: “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.”¹ “Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.”² And “Gold there is, and rubies in abundance, but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel.”³

Rather than being distracted by the rather materialistic approach the emphasis on monetary value seems to place on the wife, we must understand that the text refers to value that cannot be expressed in terms of earthly possession. If a man can really express the value of his marriage relationship in terms of dollar signs we cannot say that he is happily married. We could just as well imagine that the streets of the New Jerusalem consist of the same kind of metal that we call gold on earth.

What the text seems to say is that a man who is married to this kind of woman is truly rich, regardless of how little or much money he has in the bank. The blessing of this relationship is well expressed in the words: “She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.”

Vv.13-29 elaborate on the particular features of the lady. V.13 speaks about clothing for the family. Wool and flax are the raw material for warm and cool clothes. The law forbade combining these two ingredients: “Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together.”⁴ The verse speaks of the woman's expertise. She also has a taste for good quality. The reference to merchant ships that bring in food items from distant shores may speak of spices that did not grow in Israel but had to be imported from overseas. When the queen of Sheba visited King Solomon she brought him, among other presents, spices from her country. We read: “When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan — with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones — she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind.”⁵

This housewife who gets up early in the morning to prepare breakfast for the family and assign the servants their duty for the day is the opposite of the women the prophet Amos had in mind when he said: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks!’”⁶

She keeps her own bank account and understands the principles of investments. She does not leave the hard work up to the servants, but she is not afraid to put her shoulder to the wheel. She knows how to operate her equipment.

She is also compassionate and hospitable. She gives generously to the underprivileged. She has an eye for those in need.

She provides warmth for the family, not only physically but also emotionally. Her house looks like a home, and she dresses herself well. She stands behind her husband so that he can be a respectable member

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1. Prov. 3:13-15
 2. Prov. 8:10,11
 3. Prov. 20:15
 4. Deut. 22:11
 5. I Kings 10:1,2
 6. Amos 4:1

of the community and even run for office. She is well prepared for any future emergency. She is no airhead; when she speaks she makes sense. Her children love her and her husband is proud of her.

The question remains, where can you find a woman like that. She is the perfect woman, the ideal for every man who knows he is far from perfect himself.

Vv.29-31 sum up her character. The words “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting” do not necessarily imply that this lady has no charm or is not a beauty queen. Peter’s description of a good woman can be applied here: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.”¹

Coming to the words “A woman who fears the LORD is to be praised,” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “So we come back to the maxim with which the whole book began, that the foundation of all excellence is the fear of the Lord (... Proverbs 1:7). Such, too, is the conclusion of Ecclesiastes (... Ecclesiastes 12:13), ‘Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.’ ”

The reference to the fear of the Lord does indeed form an appropriate conclusion to the whole book. As with the book *The Song of Songs*, there have been many efforts with this part of Proverbs to spiritualize the topic. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Roman Catholic commentators have, with much ingenuity, applied the whole description of the virtuous woman, and especially the present verse, to the Virgin Mary.” It takes ingenuity to do so as a Roman Catholic believer and at the same time deal with the matter of the woman’s children who praise her and call her blessed.

It helps to keep perspective if we place this lady next to the first woman who lent herself to the serpent and picked the fruit of disobedience, thus becoming the vehicle for sin to enter the human race. This woman fears God and obeys Him. This makes her truly praiseworthy.

The fact that this acrostic ode uses all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet suggests that it says all there is to be said about the woman. That is not completely true. As we mentioned earlier, there is something missing in this poem; there is no mention of love or romance. This lady is too perfect to be real. Most modern men would feel that she is too efficient to make her a soul mate in a marriage relationship. She does form a worthy counterpart to some of the women *The Book of Proverbs* introduced to us. She may be a female model for other women who fear the Lord in that she demonstrates what the Holy Spirit can do with a life that is surrendered to the grace of God. Not only for women! As C. S. Lewis stated, in comparison with God, all of humanity is female. He wrote: “What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it.”²

Toccoa Falls, 6/5/06

1. I Peter 3:3-5

2. C. S. Lewis – *That Hideous Strength*.