

Proverbs Today

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ISBN 0 947342 36 2

Bridgeway Publications
GPO Box 2547
Brisbane 4001
Australia

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Sayings of the wise

People usually appreciate advice when it is practical, down-to-earth, and based on experience. That is one reason why proverbs are part of the heritage of most cultures. The wisdom of experience is put into short memorable sayings that can be passed on from generation to generation. The biblical book of Proverbs is an ancient Israelite composition that preserves hundreds of such sayings.

God has many ways of teaching his people. In New Testament times he used apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers; in Old Testament times he used priests, prophets and wisdom teachers.¹ The priests taught the law of Moses, the prophets stirred people with direct messages from God, and ‘the wise’ taught wisdom based on their own studies of life’s everyday affairs.²

Some of this wisdom teaching, such as we meet in Proverbs, is concerned with what we observe to be the normal outworking of right and wrong in daily life. It says, in effect, ‘as a general rule, this is what happens’. Other wisdom teaching, such as we meet in Job and Ecclesiastes, is concerned with the apparent contradictions in daily life. It says, in effect, ‘there may be puzzling exceptions to the general rule, but life still has meaning’.

Wisdom teachers were therefore more than instructors who passed on pithy sayings – and Proverbs is more than a collection of pithy sayings. Certainly, such sayings dominate, for much of the book consists of two collections of proverbs from Solomon³ along with teachings from other Israelite wise men.⁴ But the book also contains other forms of wisdom teaching. The lengthy opening section is a collection of lectures on the importance of choosing wisdom and avoiding folly,⁵ and the shorter closing section consists of three collections from other wisdom teachers.⁶ But the entire book is as profitable today as it was when first written.

1. Eph 4:11; Jer 18:18

2. Eccles 12:9-11

3. Prov 10:1-22:16 (375 proverbs) and 25:1-29:27 (128 proverbs)

4. Prov 22:17-24:34

5. Prov 1:1-9:18

6. Prov 30:1-33; 31:1-9; 31:10-31



Residential area, old Jerusalem

The basis of wisdom

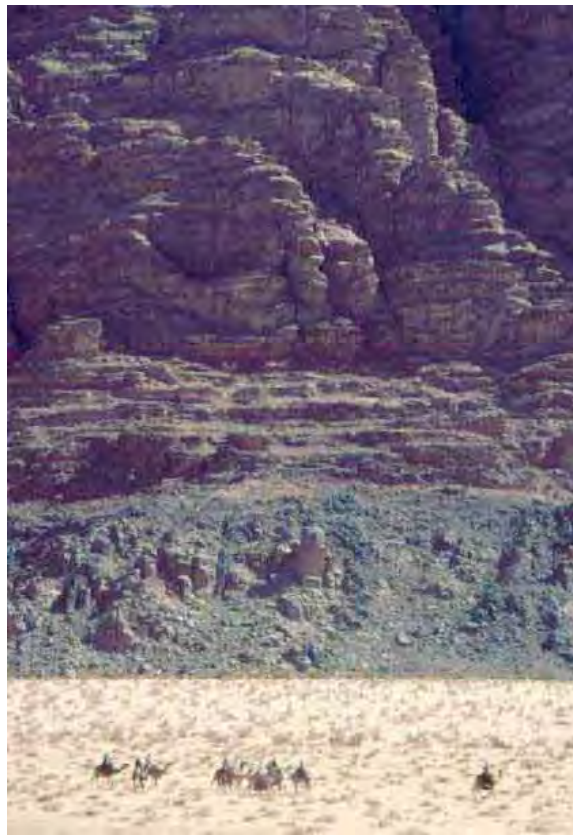
Teachers of wisdom were active in other nations besides Israel,¹ and they, like the Israelites, found helpful instruction in each other's proverbs. Sometimes they made international journeys to test each other's wisdom and broaden their experience.²

Since the wisdom that these teachers exchanged often concerned the exercise of common sense in everyday life, it is not surprising to find parallels in the proverbs of Israel and its neighbours. But there was one important distinction. The basis of Israelite wisdom was a proper understanding of God and a right relation with him – 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'.³ Israelite wisdom was not tainted by the idolatry, immorality and selfishness often found in the teaching of other nations.

There is, in any era, a form of behaviour that might appeal to people as 'the common sense thing to do', but if it does not spring from an understanding of God, the results are likely to be more harmful than helpful. The wisdom that is 'from above' motivates behaviour that is pure, peaceable, gentle, merciful, sincere and open to reason. The wisdom that is 'from below' motivates behaviour that is devilish, unspiritual, jealous, disorderly and self-assertive.⁴ Godly wisdom promotes behaviour that puts God's interests first, whereas worldly wisdom promotes behaviour that is concerned above all with one's own interests.

Because human beings have a natural bias towards self, they need to check themselves constantly if they are to maintain the sort of life that pleases God. This is where proverbs are helpful. Most are in two-line units which, in the style of Hebrew poetry, express either parallels or opposites. This makes them easy to memorize, so that they might readily come to mind as people face life day by day. But even memorization is of little use if the proverbs are not put into practice.

1. 1 Kings 4:30; Jer 49:7; 50:35; Acts 7:22
2. 1 Kings 4:31-34; 10:1
3. Prov 1:7; cf. Job 28:28; Eccles 12:13
4. James 3:15-17



Ancient Edom, noted for its 'wise men'

In the market place

Whether teaching theological truths or giving advice for living, the Bible rarely speaks in abstract language. It mostly uses picture language or gives real-life examples that anyone can understand. The writer of Proverbs does not want his teaching on the value of wisdom to be a philosophical discourse, so he gains the ordinary reader's attention with a colourful word-picture.

The writer pictures wisdom as a well-respected woman who moves around the city's streets and market places, making announcements to the people. She has something to offer that is available to anyone who wants it.¹ The meaning is that wisdom offers benefits to everyone; it is not just for the chosen few. In fact, the people who think they need it least are the ones who need it most.

Three classes of people that the woman says need wisdom are the simple, the scoffers and the fools.² None of us wants to think that we fit into any of these categories. But if we are irresponsible or easily influenced, we are those designated as simple. If we are arrogantly confident in our own ability and scornful of the opinions of others, we are what the writer calls scoffers. If we have no interest in right thinking or right behaviour, we are fools.

Educated people may find such blunt assessments offensive. What the writer is talking about, however, is not education, or even intelligence, but attitude. He is not talking about those whose mental ability is below average, but about those whose attitude to the issues of life is so sloppy that they can no longer distinguish between the worthwhile and the worthless.

Lack of wisdom caused 'the rulers of this age' to crucify the Lord of glory.³ And if people without wisdom are capable of that, they are capable of anything.

1. Prov 1:20-21; cf. 8:1-3

2. Prov 1:22; cf. 8:4-5

3. 1 Cor 2:8



Around streets and markets, Jerusalem

Cool water to a thirsty soul

‘Like cool water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country’.¹ This proverb is a favourite of those who live or travel in places far from home. The lack of news about events at home is what makes the news refreshing when it arrives, just as the lack of fluid makes a drink welcome. Thirst makes ordinary water taste like a drink from heaven.

Experiences we sometimes complain about are what make other things more enjoyable. The tiredness of a long day’s work makes sleep a greater pleasure. The loneliness of isolation gives interest to events that might hardly seem worth reporting. The trials of life lead to friendships that otherwise might never have developed their richness – as the proverb says, ‘There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother’.² The true friend is ‘born for adversity’.³

If life was free of trouble from start to finish, it would rob us of those rich contrasts that make it colourful. Like the Lord Jesus, we learn obedience through the things we suffer,⁴ and in the process move towards the full-grown person that God wants us to be. Whatever night of darkness we may go through, the new light that dawns has a glory that is the more striking because of what has gone before.

When we do not expect life to be an existence of unbroken serenity and comfort, we are likely to find true contentment. And that contentment will not only show on our faces, but will be a tonic to us and to others. ‘A glad heart makes a cheerful face . . . a cheerful heart is good medicine’.⁵

1. Prov 25:25; see also v. 13

2. Prov 18:24

3. Prov 17:17

4. Heb 5:8

5. Prov 15:13; 17:22



Cool water in a dry land

Honest work

Many proverbs encourage honest work and discourage laziness. For example, 'Lazy hands bring poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth'.¹ Some may argue that they do not see poverty as shameful or wealth as desirable. Such an attitude is commendable, but the truth behind the writer's statement is that although poverty may not be shameful, laziness is. Although wealth may not be desirable, diligence is.

Elsewhere the writer speaks of the shame that people bring on themselves when their neglected, untidy, overgrown fields silently proclaim their laziness. 'The vineyard is overgrown with thorns, the ground is covered with nettles, the wall is broken down'²

The lazy may not be concerned that they disgrace themselves, but they ought to think of the shame they bring upon their family. 'A son who sleeps in harvest brings shame.'³ Laziness is a form of selfishness. It is also destructive, as observed in the proverb, 'A lazy person is brother to a destructive person'; meaning 'failure to do what should be done is as bad as destroying what has been done'.⁴

We readily acknowledge that we must work if we are to live. But work should be more than merely a way of earning money. From the beginning, God intended people to work, and to find dignity and enjoyment in it. Many tasks in the home, the community and the church may be unpaid, but they are still work, and should be done with purpose and to the best of one's ability.

Christians have added reason for doing all things well, because they work to please their unseen master, Jesus Christ. The quality of their work should be worthy of him.⁵ In Proverbs also there is an acknowledgment that worthwhile work has value in itself. 'The person who does a good job is worthy to stand before kings'.⁶

1. Prov 10:4

2. Prov 24:30-31; cf. 15:19

3. Prov 10:5

4. Prov 18:9; cf. 21:25

5. Col 3:17,23

6. Prov 22:29



Thorns, nettles and thistles

Rewards or results?

Wisdom teachers were observers as well as thinkers. Although they struggled with the mysteries of life, they also looked at the workaday world closely and critically. They taught as those who faced life honestly.

Sometimes the 'teaching' was no more than an observation. It contained no instruction, one way or the other. For example, 'The poor are disliked by their neighbours, but the rich have many friends'.¹ 'A gift opens doors for the giver and brings him before the great'.² Elsewhere the teacher speaks sympathetically of the despised poor and critically of the corrupt rich, but here he is primarily recording his observations.

This is something we should bear in mind when reading those proverbs that may seem at first to appeal to human selfishness. For example, 'Keep my teachings, for they will prolong your life and bring you prosperity'.³ 'Honour the Lord with your wealth and the best of your crops; then your barns will be filled with grain and your vats will overflow with wine'.⁴ It seems that people are urged to a course of action solely because of the reward that lures them on.

A better way to understand such proverbs is not as inducements but as observations. The writer is not appealing to selfish motives, but telling people what will happen if they behave in a certain way. And that applies to bad behaviour as well as good.

The writer has observed that whatever people sow, eventually they reap. The consequences of their behaviour inevitably returns to them, for better or for worse. In the end, those who sow to the flesh will reap corruption, but those who sow to the Spirit will reap life.⁵

1. Prov 14:20
2. Prov 18:16
3. Prov 3:1-2
4. Prov 3:9-10
5. Gal 6:7-8



Dates, Israel

A good listener

Other people notice if we do not listen while they are speaking. Even on the telephone, they can notice our distraction if we are fiddling with a computer, scribbling down something we think more important, or trying to keep track of what is happening on the TV.

Sometimes we give an impression of listening, while thinking rather of what we want to say next. In such cases we deserve the criticism of the proverb that says, 'A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion'.¹ It is yet another form of selfishness, an indication that we consider ourselves more important than others.

On the other hand, how pleasant it is to meet those who are obviously more learned, more gifted, more in demand or more pressed for time than we are, yet they give us their undivided attention. They seem to be really interested in the comparatively insignificant matters we want to talk about. They may, of course, simply be exercising politeness (and even that is commendable), but they may be exhibiting a Christlikeness they learnt from the Master himself. For Jesus repeatedly gave his undivided attention to people who may have appeared to be wasting his time.²

This ability to listen is especially necessary when we are talking with non-Christians, so that we may allow them to express their questions, doubts and opinions. We should realize that many have a deep concern within, and if we are 'people of understanding' we shall know how to 'draw it out'.³

When exchanging views with non-Christians, however, we must be careful not to become heated if they do not readily accept what we say. We must be 'swift to hear, slow to speak', remembering that our anger is not a channel for God's righteousness.⁴ Such anger is often an indication of pride – a feeling of hurt that they reject our arguments rather than sorrow that they reject God's truth.

1. Prov 18:2

2. Mark 5:35-43; 6:30-44; 10:13-16,46-52

3. Prov 20:5

4. James 1:19-20; cf. Prov 17:27; 29:20



Streetside, Jordan

The enjoyment of nature

A much-read part of Proverbs is the second half of Chapter 8, which speaks of the existence of wisdom before the world's creation. Not only was God the source of this wisdom, but by wisdom he created the universe. 'The Lord by wisdom laid the earth's foundations, and by understanding he established the heavens.'¹

Like the wisdom teachers, the songwriters of Israel also had an appreciation of the wisdom of God in creation. Many psalms describe the splendour of the physical world, the most detailed and perhaps the most moving being the lengthy Psalm 104. There the psalmist, like the wisdom teacher, sees every element in the physical creation as a product of God's wisdom. Worshipfully he exclaims, 'In wisdom you made them all'.²

When people do not acknowledge God as the sovereign Creator, they tend to drift into one of two extremes. Many exalt nature beyond what it deserves, sometimes to the point where environmental values outweigh human values. They may even see no distinction between nature and God. Nature becomes sovereign and they become pantheists.³

By contrast, other people see nature chiefly as something they can exploit for selfish gain. They are not concerned for the needs of either the physical environment or other human beings. This was a problem in ancient Israel just as it is today. 'The poor man's field may produce much food, but it is swept away through injustice.'⁴

The lengthy statement of Proverbs 8 referred to above concludes by showing how God rejoices in the inhabited world and delights in the human race.⁵ Whatever pleasure people find in nature is but a faint reflection of the joy experienced by God himself; but even this cannot compare with the love God has for those created in his image. And that is the way it should be with us.



Lotus flowers

1. Prov 3:19-20; 8:22-30

2. Ps 104:24

3. Pantheism is a belief that God is everything and everything is God.

4. Prov 13:23

5. Prov 8:31

Can we trust each other?

Many people do not like to be given instruction, especially the black-and-white instruction that we meet in Proverbs. This is a reflection on our fallen human nature; we do not like laws. We want to be free from restraints, free to do our own thing. But in that case we shall soon discover that where there is no law there is no trust. And without trust, society falls apart.

We see this, for example, when some catastrophe occurs and there is a breakdown in law and order. Looting becomes common, even among those who normally do not break in and steal. Once any course of action becomes more convenient – cheating the tax office, shoplifting, prostitution, abortion, divorce – people will be tempted to take advantage of it.

If we can barely trust ourselves to maintain personal standards once society's restraints are relaxed, how much less can we trust others – people we do not know at all. That is why a society needs civil laws. Where people do not know each other personally, they must have some recognized standard by which society can function.

Within the family, however, written laws should not be necessary. The trust between husband and wife should produce a confidence in their relationship, so that it might be said of the wife, 'her husband trusts in her',¹ and of the husband, 'she does him good all the days of her life'.² This trust not only gives security to their relationship, but also helps in bringing up their children. The 'father's teaching' and the 'mother's instruction' are equally beneficial because the two people trust and support each other.³

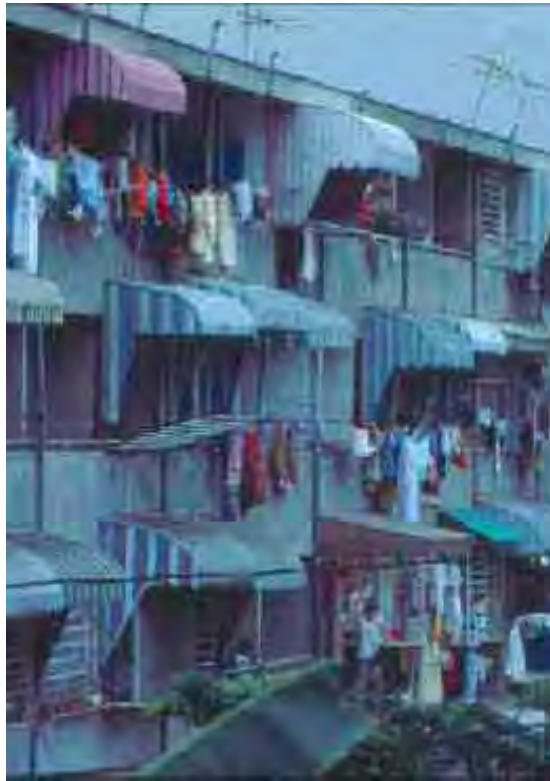
Parents hope that as the children grow to maturity, their lifestyle will exhibit a degree of quality and so reflect well upon the family name.⁴ At the same time they are aware, as many Proverbs affirm, that family failures occur and heartache results. We do not always achieve the ideal, but that is no reason to throw the ideal away.

1. Prov 31:11

2. Prov 31:12

3. Prov 1:8; 6:20

4. Prov 23:24-25



High density housing, Indonesia

Permissiveness

The repeated warnings in Proverbs against prostitution show that sexual immorality was as widespread a problem then as it is now.¹ Those who go looking for unrestrained sexual pleasure often end up feeling disgusted with themselves. This is well expressed by a man who, thinking back on his misguided adventures, confesses, 'I hated discipline and despised correction. I did not listen to my teachers'.²

From earliest times people have wanted to be free to do as they wish, regardless of the restrictions God or any other authority might place upon them. This attitude is commonly called 'permissiveness', and the society that approves of it 'the permissive society'. People want freedom in a range of moral issues, especially sex. By this we mean not the freedom to make love (people have always had that freedom), but the freedom to do so with any person they desire, regardless of a marriage commitment.

We cannot, however, pick and choose from God's moral law, wanting society to acknowledge certain boundaries when it suits us but allow unlimited freedom when it does not. If we have permissiveness in matters where we want it, we shall soon have it in matters where we do not want it. The moral weakness that wants permissiveness in sexual behaviour cannot stop it from affecting other behaviour. The rebellion against restraint that produces sexual licence produces also greed, cheating, violence, corruption, lying and oppression.

In reality, what most people want is permissiveness for themselves but restraint for others. But God's moral order does not work that way. The one who said, 'Do not commit adultery' also said, 'Do not kill'.³ Once we accept one part of God's moral order, we are committed to accepting the lot. But, as the person in Proverbs discovered, to accept any part requires self-discipline. And self-discipline, since it reduces the need for imposed discipline, genuinely promotes a free society.

1. Prov 2:16-19; 5:1-14; 6:23-27; 7:1-27
2. Prov 5:12-13
3. James 2:11



Artemis, or Diana, worshipped in Ephesus as a fertility goddess

Christian influence

Activity done in the name of Christianity has not always helped the Christian cause (the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries provide one unhappy example), but this ought not to blind us to the great amount of good it has done. Christians have practised the sort of social concern taught in the law of Moses and reinforced in many Hebrew proverbs. God's people have been leaders in helping the poor,¹ providing for good health,² establishing equal justice for all,³ protecting minorities,⁴ and ensuring fair trading standards.⁵

Many welfare services that we today take for granted (for example, hospitals) were Christian initiatives. A feature of the Western church's missionary work has been the provision of education and medical services for those who lacked them. Even in countries where Western missionaries no longer work, national Christian ministries usually provide services to those who are poor, sick, inadequately educated and easily exploited. Often this Christian care is the only care that such people receive.

Christians have been leaders in removing social evils such as child labour and slavery, and promoting social virtues such as freedom of speech and racial equality. But if we wish to enjoy the benefits that Christianity brings, we should defend and promote the values that produce those benefits. History shows that when Christian influence is removed, the nation suffers. Freedom of speech is lost, the right to a fair hearing vanishes, ethnic minorities are made inferior, the destitute are left helpless and the disabled are forgotten.

When the proverb says, 'Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to the people',⁶ it is not encouraging a particular nation to think it is better than others, but saying that any nation is capable of the greatest good or the greatest evil. A lot depends upon how much God's people are committed to God's values.

1. Exod 22:22-27; Lev 19:9-10,13; Prov 28:27; 29:7
2. Lev 13:1-59; Deut 23:10-13; Prov 23:20-21; 24:13
3. Exod 23:3,6; Lev 19:15; Prov 18:5; 21:3,15; 24:24; 31:9
4. Exod 23:9; Lev 19:33-34; Prov 31:8
5. Lev 19:35-36; Prov 11:1; 20:10,23
6. Prov 14:34



Christian care for orphans in the hills of Myanmar

What we put into life

Many Christians see the church as a sort of club – something that exists for the benefit of the members. And like club members in general, they are mostly in the club for what they can get out of it, not what they can give to it.

Experience shows, however, that when people's actions are determined chiefly by what is of benefit to them, they are rarely happy. The truly happy people are those who are so concerned with giving service to others that they have no time to sit around thinking about how to bring themselves contentment. Happiness is something that comes as a by-product of something else. We get it when we don't seek it. If we do seek it, we soon find that it has a way of cheating us.

By giving to others we enrich ourselves; by keeping for personal indulgence we impoverish ourselves. As the proverb says, 'Some people give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what they should give, and only suffer want.'¹ Contrasting examples are then given. Some hold back food in a time of scarcity in the hope of forcing up the price, but others gladly sell at a price that helps the needy. The former are cursed, the latter blessed.²

Often the church's work suffers (and not just the church's work, but community service in general), because people are motivated by what suits them, not by what suits others. Workers are hard to find if the work is unpaid and done in one's own time, but not if it pays good wages and is limited to set working hours.

When personal interest is people's main consideration, the church cannot function as God intended. Soon people are complaining that they 'get nothing from the church', and start looking for another. But the church is like most other things in life in that we only get out of it what we put into it.

1. Prov 11:24; see also v. 25

2. Prov 11:26



Water for passers-by, Jordan

Love and the law

Two proverbs in Chapter 28 declare that obedience to God's law teaches us how to resist wrongdoers (v. 4) and how to decide which people make fitting companions and which do not (v. 7). As in many other parts of the Bible, the law of God spoken of here is not a collection of regulations, but the written revelation of what God is like and what he wants us to be like. To keep this law means to love God and, next to that, to love others.¹

An emphasis on love does not mean that moral standards no longer apply or that wrongdoing can be ignored. Love and law are not opposed. God's purpose in making known his law is not to reduce people to a state where love has no place and they can no longer be themselves, but to show them the sort of life that he, their Maker, wants for them.

God wants people to enjoy life because of a relationship they enjoy with him. In human relationships the more loving and understanding two people are, the more each does what pleases the other. Although they may keep certain unwritten 'rules', they do not see them as rules. The relationship is based on love, which is how God wants it to be with us. Love is not an alternative to the law, but the fulfilment of it.²

Once we have this right relation with God, we shall not see his teachings as burdensome.³ If we love Jesus, we shall want to keep his commandments.⁴ The New Testament is no different from the Old in giving specific instruction about right and wrong behaviour, and Jesus did not teach that we can do as we like provided we are acting in love. Certainly, he condemned those whose law-keeping made them proud of themselves and critical of others, but he did not oppose the law itself. In fact, his teaching about love-based behaviour came direct from the Old Testament.⁵

1. Matt 22:35-39

2. Rom 13:8,10

3. 1 John 5:3

4. John 14:15,23; 15:10

5. Lev 19:17-18; Deut 10:12-13



Christ Church, Jerusalem

The tongue

In a way, biblical statements about the right and wrong use of the tongue are easy to preach on. They require little explanation, and the hearers know from experience that they are true. In another way, however, the statements are difficult to preach on, because preachers are as likely to err as anyone else. People have succeeded in taming birds and other animals, but no one has succeeded in taming the tongue.¹

We all know the truth of the saying, ‘When words are many, transgression is not lacking’,² and therefore we should discipline ourselves to use words sparingly and selectively. The problem may not be that we set out to injure someone (though there are times when that is the case³), but that our ability to control the tongue is not as good as we thought.

Words need not be directed at a particular person in order to do damage. They can do damage even when overheard by someone outside the circle of conversation. Ugly words stick in the mind – which is one reason why we must be especially careful of the words we use within the hearing of children. But fine words also stick in the mind, and every time we say something worthwhile, it could have unexpected and lasting benefit in the life of someone who is listening.

Fine words are therefore of priceless value: ‘the tongue of the righteous is choice silver’, ‘the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel’, and ‘a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver’.⁴ It is sobering to remember what Jesus said about giving account of our words in the day of judgment,⁵ but that ought not to make us timid. God wants us to use our tongues helpfully but truthfully. ‘The tongue of the wise brings healing’ and ‘truthful lips endure for ever’.⁶

1. James 3:7-8

2. Prov 10:19

3. Prov 11: 9,12; 12:18; 26:24

4. Prov 10:20; 20:15; 25:11

5. Matt 12:36-37

6. Prov 12:18-19



Tamed animals put to use, Pakistan

A tree of life

When Solomon, early in Proverbs, said that wisdom brings a long life of peace, contentment and prosperity, he no doubt had much in his experience to support the assertion. He was wise and he seemed to lack nothing. To him, wisdom was a 'tree of life', a source of all that was desirable for an enjoyable and fulfilling life.¹

In the collection of Solomon's proverbs that follows, the picture of the tree of life reappears. The fruit of righteousness is a tree of life, because of the enriching influence it has on others.² A desire fulfilled is a tree of life, because it uplifts those who might otherwise be crushed in spirit.³ A gentle tongue is a tree of life, because its kind words heal the broken-hearted.⁴

The picture of the tree of life very likely comes from the Garden of Eden, where a long life of peace, contentment and prosperity was available, but only if people were submissive to God and obedient. They were not to eat of the other tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because God alone was the one who determined what was right and what was wrong. But human beings, from the beginning, have not been content with submission to God. They want to 'be like God', have their 'eyes opened', have 'the knowledge of good and evil' and, by any means available, gain whatever is 'desirable to make one wise'.⁵

Solomon, in spite of the wisdom he taught, fell into the same sin as Adam and Eve. He wanted to be independent of God and determine what was right and what was wrong. In the end his life was not the noble example it would have been had he submitted to God. He taught the wisdom God gave him, but then failed to practise what he taught.⁶ Wisdom *is* a tree of life, but it begins with reverence for God,⁷ and that requires obedience.



1. Prov 3:13-18; cf 1 Kings 4:24,29; 10:23
2. Prov 11:30
3. Prov 13:12
4. Prov 15:4
5. Gen 2:9,16-17; 3:1-6
6. 1 Kings 11:6-10
7. Prov 1:7

Life, shade, refreshment

Grudgingly or gladly?

In the two sections that collect sayings from Israelite wise men other than Solomon,¹ most of the teachings are lengthier than the familiar two-line form. They extend over several verses, which enables them to build more detailed pictures or give explanatory comment. The subjects they deal with are similar to those dealt with elsewhere.

One colourful picture warns that some selfish people are so miserable that any attempt to get close to them only makes them more miserable. The illustration is of a wealthy but mean person who grudgingly has guests for a meal and all the time is thinking of how much these guests are costing him. The guests are trying to make pleasant conversation, but they are wasting their words.² It is almost impossible to make selfish people happy.

Some people have a way of giving that lets the receiver know they are giving not because they want to but because they are required to. Their heart is not in it. The same is true of certain people who are asked to help in some work or activity. They might consent to help, but they do so in such a way that those who asked them wished they had kept quiet.

Proverbs, like the rest of the Bible, encourages people not just to do their duty, but also to do it in the right spirit. More than that, they should gladly do more than people ask of them. 'Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due when it is in your power to do it. And do not say to your neighbour, "Come back tomorrow and I will give it to you", when you already have it with you'.³

No matter what people give – time, effort, work, possessions, money – they should give it gladly, not grudgingly. God has always loved the cheerful giver.⁴



1. Prov 22:17-24:22 and 24:23-34

2. Prov 23:6-8

3. Prov 3:27-28

4. 2 Cor 9:7

Generous meal, Zambia

Plugging the hole

If we are not careful, an apparently trivial matter can grow into a major conflict. ‘The beginning of strife is like letting out water’.¹ The picture is of water that begins to leak out of a dam. If not stopped, it will increase in volume till it bursts out – and then all the water is lost. Applying this illustration to the beginnings of ill feeling between two people, the proverb gives the blunt advice, ‘quit before the quarrel breaks out’.

The Lord Jesus gave similar instruction.² The best thing to do is forgive, not only because it is a fitting attitude for those who have themselves received forgiveness, but also because when people bear grudges they do more harm to themselves than to anyone else. If, on the other hand, they do not allow themselves to be easily offended, they make life much easier for everyone. As the proverb says, ‘their glory is to overlook an offence.’³

Another proverb concerned with avoiding disputes says, ‘Argue your case with your neighbour himself and do not disclose another’s secret’.⁴ In other words, it is unwise to rush into conflict with someone on the basis of hearsay or gossip. Personal discussion with the person may reveal that one did not have the full story.

The second part of the proverb gives the caution that, having learnt the facts, one must not make public something that has been told in confidence. People who spread such stories ruin their own reputation – an observation that concludes the proverb in the next verse: ‘. . . lest those who hear you shame you, and you never lose your bad reputation.’⁵ A talebearer cannot be trusted. We can be assured that if a person breaks a confidence in telling us a story about someone else, that same person will have no hesitation in telling other people stories about us.



Failed dam, no water, dry creek

1. Prov 17:14
2. Matt 5:25-26
3. Prov 19:11
4. Prov 25:9
5. Prov 25:10

Small things

It is not difficult to associate wisdom with people or things that are impressive to look at. But the wise man Agur reminds us that some things may be very small but at the same time very wise.¹

Ants, for example, are so small as to appear physically powerless, but they have enough wisdom to store up food to avoid a shortage when it is less readily available. Rock badgers are not as small as ants but, realizing they are an easy prey for more powerful animals, they secure themselves by building homes in rocky clefts. Locusts have no king to direct them, but they know that orderly discipline and cooperation will ensure a worthwhile existence. The household lizard is a small and apparently insignificant creature, but it is at home in places where most people could never dream of living, such as the palaces of the mighty.

God seems often to choose things that appear weak to shame those that appear strong. He chooses people who are despised to bring to nothing those who think themselves wise.² When children bring him praise, they put to shame adults who cannot understand the plain evidence before them.³

This is not to say that the prayers of children are to be the pattern for the prayers of adults. God does not expect childishness from mature people, but he does seem to like things that are honest and practical. And the prayers of children, though often concerned with apparently small and insignificant matters, are at least honest and practical. They know what adults have at times forgotten, namely, that God is interested in the small things as well as the big things.

If God sees the activities of ants, badgers, locusts and lizards, he sees also the details of human life. If he notices the fall of a sparrow,⁴ he notices also the activities of human beings. And again it may be the small things that indicate whether or not they are wise.

1. Prov 30:24-28

2. 1 Cor 1:27-28

3. Matt 21:14-16

4. Matt 10:29



Children, Uganda

Fuel for the fire

Immeasurable damage can be done through a trivial piece of gossip. 'For lack of wood the fire goes out; and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases'.¹ Something might begin as idle talk, but through the addition of personal comments, half-truths and exaggerations it finishes up doing great damage. 'A great forest can be set ablaze by a small fire'.²

One problem with gossip is that we always think the problem applies to others, not to us. Some people might admit to being too talkative, and others might admit to being sharp-tongued, but it is difficult to find anyone who would admit to being a gossip. We have even learnt how to gossip by using a spiritual tone of voice. The truth is, according to the wise man, that 'those who belittle others lack sense', whereas 'those who keep quiet have understanding'. While 'talebearers reveal secrets', 'the trustworthy keep a matter hidden'.³

If not checked, gossip can become a habit; worse still, an enjoyable habit. 'The words of the gossip are like delicious pieces of food; they go down into the inner parts of the body'.⁴ They give people a satisfaction that arises only because they consider themselves to be free of the failures they report in others. But such self-confidence leads to self-deception. To feel superior is a sign not of wisdom, but of folly.

There is, however, another kind of speech that can become a habit – again an enjoyable habit, and again likened to something enjoyable to the mouth and the stomach. Pleasant words, like honeycomb, are sweetness to the soul and health to the body.⁵ They also have a far-reaching effect, but in this case the effect is helpful, not destructive. As wisdom teaches people to use the right words, their speech is not only pleasant but also persuasive.⁶

1. Prov 26:20
2. James 3:5-6
3. Prov 11:12-13
4. Prov 18:8
5. Prov 16:24
6. Prov 16:21,23



Bushfire

Grandparents

Younger people usually prefer not to think that, according to the normal course of events, one day they will be old. Some dread the thought. But many people, having reached an age that they formerly thought of as 'old', find they do not feel as old as they had imagined.

Certainly, old age brings disadvantages, but it also has its bonuses. A lifetime of experience, for example, sometimes gives a quickness of perception that compensates for slowness in physical mobility. It may also have taught people to be patient where once they were impatient, to be calm where once they were turbulent. Old age, symbolized in the proverb by 'grey hair', has a certain 'glory' if it comes at the end of 'a righteous life'.¹

Understandably, younger people do not appreciate the intrusion of older people into their affairs, but they may be surprised at the sympathetic hearing they get when they take older people into their confidence. The grey-headed should not be despised. An aged father, mother or grandparent need not yet be written off as outdated.² If they have lived their years in a healthy relationship with a wise and loving God, they should have wisdom from which younger people can profit.

In every generation, parents make sacrifices so that their children enjoy opportunities and benefits that they themselves were denied. Rarely do older people show any jealousy because of this. On the contrary, they receive much enjoyment through seeing their children and grandchildren benefit from the privileges they lacked. This is one way in which 'grandchildren are the crown of the aged'³, and one reason why the aged should not be forgotten.⁴

1. Prov 16:31
2. Prov 23:22
3. Prov 17:6
4. 1 Tim 5:4



Grandparents

Fair play

Most citizens have a sense of 'fair play' in the way people in authority deal with issues. This is reflected in a number of proverbs scattered through the book. 'When things go well with the righteous, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish there are shouts of joy'.¹ In spite of the failings of human nature, people are still able to acknowledge goodness when they see it, and are pleased when they see cruelty and injustice dealt with.

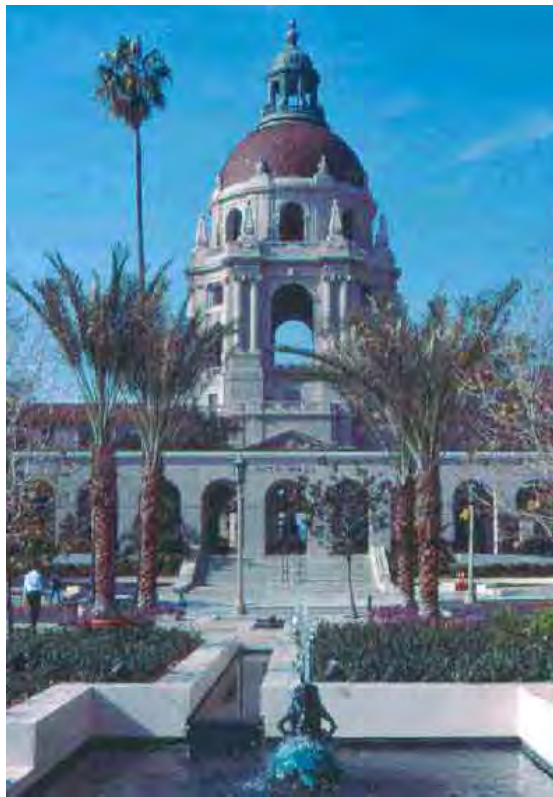
At the same time, citizens should not allow themselves to be swept along by the current of popular opinion. Public feeling can change quickly. That is one reason why government is necessary, even though it may not be the government of our choice. If a body of capable people can share their insights, they can at least provide some stability. 'Without guidance a nation will fall, but with many counsellors there is security.'²

Trouble arises, however, when the government become oppressive and corrupt. Those with money or influence can buy favours, while those who are defenceless or disliked suffer discrimination. In short, when the wicked rule, 'the people groan', 'bribery ruins the nation', 'officials become liars', and 'transgression increases'.³

In view of the devastating effect that a small group, or even one person, can have on an entire nation, Proverbs records the advice given on one occasion to a nation's ruler. It is in the form of a poem written by the man's mother.⁴

The central point of the poem is that, whereas some rulers may use their position to bring self-satisfaction, truly dedicated rulers should deny themselves personal pleasures in order to serve their people properly. Only in this way can they judge with justice and defend the vulnerable. Self-centredness, whether among rulers or among citizens in general, ultimately brings disorder and injustice. Self-denial ensures a more worthwhile life for everyone.

1. Prov 11:10
2. Prov 11:14; cf. 8:12-16
3. Prov 29:2,4,12,16
4. Prov 31:1-9



Seat of government

Status seekers

A number of colourful proverbs show that the desire to impress can easily land people in trouble. Some spend beyond their means and finish with ruinous debts. They should have heeded the proverb that says it is better to be of humble standing and debt-free than to act as someone important and go hungry.¹ As another proverb says, they pretend to be rich but have nothing (while some stingy people pretend to be poor but are wealthy).²

Being seen with the right people helps the ambitious move up the social ladder. At the same time they hope to gain material benefits that will help them further. That is why 'many seek the favour of the person who is rich and generous, and everyone wants the friendship of those who give favours'.³

Money is seen as one way to achieve personal ambitions. But it can also lead to corruption. Bribery gives access to people of influence and smooths over obstacles that appear along the way.⁴ In the process it destroys trust and makes honest dealings impossible. For once people can be bought, they can no longer be trusted.

We do not know where selfish ambition may lead. But we can be sure that the New Testament is making an accurate observation when it says, 'where selfish ambition exists, there you will find disorder and every kind of evil practice'.⁵ In a day when self-assertion is promoted as a virtue, we need to remind ourselves of the warning of Solomon, echoed by Jesus, against being too concerned about status and too eager for the most prominent position. Jesus added to Solomon's warning that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.⁶

1. Prov 12:9

2. Prov 13:7

3. Prov 19:6

4. Prov 18:16; 21:14

5. James 3:16

6. Prov 25:6-7; Luke 14:7-11



Enticements

Friends and neighbours

In societies where families are close-knit, people are expected to be helpful to relatives, particularly in times of crisis. Even then, they may give help out of a sense of duty more than out of warm-hearted love. Therefore, while Proverbs encourages family loyalties, it sometimes rates the true friend ahead of a brother or sister. It also acknowledges that not all 'friends' are the real thing.¹

Within any society there will be those who want to befriend others mainly because of what they hope to get from them.² True friends, however, do not use each other for personal benefit, nor do they try to impress with empty or insincere words.³ They are honestly open with each other, rebuking when necessary, forgiving generously, and conversing in a way that sharpens the other's perceptions.⁴

Most people want to live in a neighbourhood that promotes this kind of friendship. Unfortunately, there are nuisances who always spoil things. Chapter 26 collects a number of proverbs that give colourful descriptions of some of these people.

First there are the busybodies, always meddling in other people's affairs (v. 17). Then there are the thoughtless chatterers who, when they see the damage they have done, excuse themselves by saying they were only joking (v. 18-19). Some people gossip and others argue constantly about trifles, but between them they keep alive matters that should have died long ago (v. 20-22). Others specialize in smooth talk that hides a vicious heart – as the glaze on a pot hides the rough earthenware beneath (v. 23-26).

Believers have their patience tested by such people, but they must be 'slow to anger', and must not say, 'We shall do to them as they have done to us'.⁵ The Old Testament gives the same teaching as the New: 'If your enemies hunger, feed them'.⁶

1. Prov 17:17; 18:24

2. Prov 6:1-5; 19:4

3. Prov 27:14; 28:23

4. Prov 17:9; 27:6,17

5. Prov 16:32; 24:29

6. Prov 25:21-22; cf. Rom 12:20



Villagers winnowing grain, Nepal

Seven things God hates

A characteristic of ancient Hebrew poetry is to give a numbered list of items – ‘three things and four’, ‘six things and seven’ – as representative of something larger. This feature occurs in Proverbs 6:16-19,¹ where seven sins are listed as being especially hateful to God. They are not ‘seven deadly sins’ in the sense that they can never be forgiven, but examples of destructive sin concerning which a wise teacher warns his young student.

In summary, the seven sins are pride, lying, murder, evil plotting, violence, false witness and trouble-making. The verses mention the eyes, tongue, hands, heart and feet, and show that the sins are concerned with attitudes, words, thoughts and actions. They serve as a warning that no sin can be treated lightly. One bad habit leads to another, till in the end a person’s entire being comes under the control of sin. Jesus said, ‘Whoever commits sin becomes the slave of sin’,² and Paul echoed this in his teaching.³

This is good reason for keeping close watch on our habits. The gross sins people commit are not normally out of keeping with the character they have developed. By carelessly giving in to an apparently minor sin, we increase the possibility of giving in again, till eventually a minor fault becomes a major problem. Negligence leads to ruin, a truth reflected in proverbs that speak of houses falling to pieces, stone walls broken down and farmlands overgrown with weeds.⁴ Their condition is not what the owners originally desired; it is the product of neglect.

To prevent being ruined by bad habits, we need to cultivate good habits. Then, as Paul goes on to say in the passage referred to above, the habit of obedience makes us slaves of righteousness. Instead of being in bondage to sins that are hateful to God, we produce the character that is pleasing to God.

1. Also in Chapter 30 and elsewhere in the Old Testament.
2. John 8:34
3. Rom 6:16
4. Prov 15:19; 24:30-34; Eccles 10:18



Through negligence ‘a stone wall is broken down’

Concern for the poor

Any reading of the Bible will show that God has a special concern for the poor. In particular he is concerned for those who are poor through no fault of their own.

God identifies himself with the poor in such a way that those who despise them despise him.¹ When people oppress the poor, their cries touch God's heart in a way that causes him to deal with the oppressors as mercilessly as they dealt with the poor.² In like manner he sees kindnesses done to the poor as if they were done to him, and rewards them accordingly. 'Those who are kind to the poor lend to the Lord, and he will repay them in full'.³

In between the two extremes of oppressing the poor and helping the poor is the attitude of a large portion of the human race, and that is indifference. People may not imagine themselves to be working actively against the poor, but if they maintain a lifestyle and support policies that ensure their continued well-being at the expense of the poor, God sees their indifference as cruelty.

When people close their ears to the cries of the poor, God closes his ears to their cries.⁴ One reason why many Christians in rich countries lack a living relation with God is their indifference to the plight of fellow Christians in poor countries.

Just as the Old Testament demonstrated God's identification with the poor, so did the Lord Jesus. As the one who was God in human form, Jesus taught that indifference to the poor was indifference to him, and kindness to the poor was kindness to him. People deceive themselves when they think they can be disciples of Jesus Christ and at the same time neglect the poor, the hungry, the diseased and the outcasts.⁵

1. Prov 17:5

2. Isa 3:13-15; 5:8-10; cf. Prov 22:16,22-23

3. Prov 19:17

4. Prov 21:13

5. Matt 25:34-46; 1 John 3:17



Shredding tyres

Walking in the light

The Bible is full of word-pictures that use light and darkness as illustrations of life. The best known concern the Lord Jesus, who brought the light of God into a dark world. He called people to turn from the darkness of their sin and walk in the light that came from him.¹ The early Christian teachers followed this usage, reminding believers that if they had come from darkness to light, they should live in the light and walk in the light.²

In the Old Testament, psalmists, prophets and wisdom teachers used the same pictures to contrast righteousness and sin. They identified light with God and desired that believers walk in the light that came from him.³ This notion of walking in the light is well expressed in a splendid picture in Proverbs: 'The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn; it grows steadily brighter till the full light of day'.⁴

The picture is of a road at sunrise, where the righteous begin their journey in the clearness and freshness of early morning. The sun is not yet hot, and as its soft rays shine out of a cloudless sky it has an invigorating effect on the travellers. It also gives them a sense of security, for with the arrival of daylight they can set out with less risk of meeting dangers along the road.

One thing that the righteous observe is that life gets better as they journey on. The light that welcomed them at dawn grows steadily brighter as the day progresses. Their fellowship with God becomes richer, and they learn the joy of gladly accepting what he allows rather than selfishly demanding what they want. When things go wrong their impulse is not to question God, but to ask themselves what God might be teaching them. Even if they stumble along the road, they do not leave it. For them, this is the only road worth travelling – and the light keeps getting brighter.

1. John 1:5,9; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35-36

2. Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9;
1 John 1:7; 2:9-10

3. Job 29:2-3; Ps 27:1; 36:9; Isa 2:5; 9:2

4. Prov 4:18



Clear light, pleasant travel

Animals

Israelite law required people to treat their working animals kindly, to feed them well in reward for their work and to give them proper rest.¹ This consideration is reflected in the proverb that says, 'The righteous have regard for the needs of their animals'.²

Because they were largely a farming people, Israelites relied upon their working animals to provide them with a steady income and a reasonable standard of living. They knew the truth of the saying, 'Abundant crops come by the strength of the ox'.³ At the same time they needed to remember what we all must remember, namely, that concern for personal well-being must not over-ride all other considerations. When personal profit is the driving motive, working animals can suffer.

For this reason an extended piece of instruction urges readers to 'know well the condition of their flocks' because 'riches do not last for ever'.⁴ The passage shows how greed and impatience lead to exploitation, which in turn damages the lives of animals, ruins pastures and creates a shortage of the very products that people want in greater quantities. As always, selfishness works against those who practise it. On the other hand, God provides for those who trust in his provision.

This appreciation of animals is shown elsewhere in Proverbs. The skill and grace of animals is seen in 'the way of an eagle in the sky and the way of a snake on a rock';⁵ the dignity and assurance of animals is seen in the movements of the prowling lion, the strutting cock and the sure-footed goat.⁶ God is surely pleased when we see that the animals he created are admirable for reasons other than the material profits they generate.

1. Deut 5:14; 22:10; 25:4
2. Prov 12:10
3. Prov 14:4
4. Prov 27:23-27
5. Prov 30:19
6. Prov 30:29-31



Sheep fields near Assos, Turkey

Bless this house

The many proverbs that deal with life in the home are well summarized in the words, 'the Lord blesses the house of the righteous'.¹ But righteous people are practical people, and if this promise is to be realized fully, something is required of all who live in the house.

First of all, husband and wife must make a special effort to be lovingly considerate of each other; if not, the house that was intended to be a place of calm and peace can degenerate into one of tension and quarrelling.² Parents must discipline their children firmly but lovingly; if not, the children may grow up to be spoiled and to have no respect for their parents.³ All who live in the house must learn to be thoughtful and forgiving; if not, they will find that, by insisting on having their way, they bring unending discontent.⁴

From the outside, some houses appear to lack nothing. They look as if they provide every comfort for the occupants, and may even provide lavish meals for family and guests. But no fruit of wealth can compensate for the absence of harmony in the house. It is better to live simply amid peace than to live extravagantly amid conflict; better to eat a little food with quiet than to have a house full of feasting with strife; better to have simple food where love is than to have rich food amid hatred.⁵

When the Lord Jesus went into people's homes, he brought the sorts of blessings reflected in Proverbs. He brought peace where there was distress, calm where there was turmoil, healing where there was sickness, forgiveness where there was sin, joy where there was sadness, life where there was death. He did not promise a trouble-free home for the future, and neither does he give such a promise today. Nevertheless, if the presence of Christ is there, those in the house will be blessed and those outside will notice.

1. Prov 3:33
2. Prov 12:4; 19:13-14; 31:28-29
3. Prov 13:1,24; 15:20; 19:18,26; 22:6
4. Prov 11:29; 17:13; 21:9
5. Prov 15:17; 17:1



Bangalore, India

Better than others?

We can all think of times when we, like the writers in Proverbs, have seen demonstrations of haughtiness in the uplifted eyes and disdainful glances of those who think themselves better than others.¹ The danger is that we do not see how easily we too can be guilty of pride, even though we may have no inclination to make any show of superiority.

Pride is a universal sin and probably the most subtle. It causes us to spoil things that otherwise are good, so that moments of pure joy can be corrupted. We might genuinely rejoice at having done something worthwhile for God, but then are easily turned from thinking of his glory to thinking of ourselves – how noble we were, how well we performed, how others were impressed. Too often we are more concerned about what people think about us than what they think about God. We want to draw them into our circle of admirers more than see them draw closer to God.

Most of us are aware of this. As with much of the Bible, the problem is not with understanding difficult teachings but with putting simple teachings into practice. We know the truth of the proverb that ‘pride comes before a fall’,² but we still have difficulty overcoming the natural tendency to self-centredness.

Hebrew proverbs like to present opposites in contrast, and in the case of pride the opposite is humility.³ There is nothing artificial about the humility taught in the Bible. It does not require us to tell lies to ourselves, as if we must pretend to be something we know we are not. God equips people differently, but whatever we are or do, we have no cause to think of ourselves more highly than we ought.⁴ As the apostle says, ‘What have you that you did not receive? And if you received it, why boast about it?’⁵

1. Prov 6:17; 21:4,24; 30:13

2. Prov 16:18; 18:12; cf. 1 Cor 10:12

3. Prov 11:2; 18:12

4. Rom 12:3

5. 1 Cor 4:7



The ‘mighty’, now only a monument; Russia

Two feasts

At the beginning of Proverbs the writer gave a word-picture that likened wisdom to a well-respected woman who went around the streets and market places offering wisdom to any who would accept it.¹ In a later word-picture he again likens wisdom to such a woman, and this time she invites the silly and the ignorant to a feast that she has prepared in her magnificent house.² 'Come, eat my bread . . . drink my wine . . . leave simpleness . . . walk in the way of insight.' Wisdom gives people insight and discernment.

In contrast to the invitation of the gracious woman Wisdom is the invitation of the boisterous prostitute Folly. There is nothing magnificent about her house, but she also invites the silly and the ignorant to come inside and enjoy her food. She assures them they will find the food sweet and pleasurable, but she does not tell them that the food is nothing other than 'stolen water and bread'.³ The feast turns out to be a meagre portion of food that has to be eaten in secret; and the guests find out that instead of being in the company of those who are full of life they are in the world of the dead.

As in other parts of Proverbs, the illustration is raw and colourful, but its warning is blunt and uncompromising. Unlawful pleasures are tempting, but the satisfaction they bring is brief and the damage they do is lasting. They can ruin a person's life.

The writer began his illustration, however, not by talking about the dangers of sexual temptations, but by urging people to be discerning in the way they live. When people readily believe the persuasive words of those who know how to manipulate their responses, they demonstrate a lack of the wisdom God offers. Yet God gives it generously to those whose genuinely seek it.⁴

1. Prov 1:20-33
2. Prov 9:1-6
3. Prov 9:13-18
4. James 1:5-6



Promotion and persuasion, Hong Kong

What we do and what we are

The wisdom teacher agrees with the prophet that people displease God when they carry out religious rituals but do not live uprightly. 'God hates the sacrifice of the wicked, but is pleased with the prayer of the upright . . . To practise righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.'¹

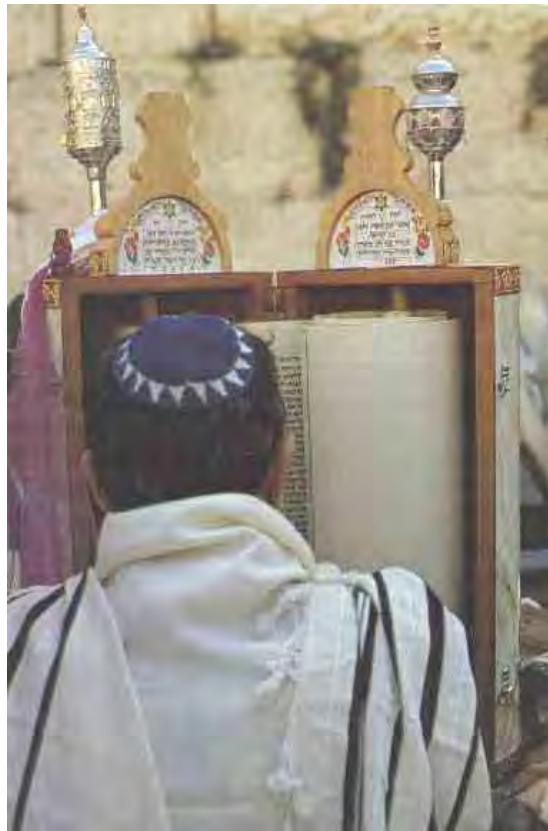
Deep within the human heart is the notion that we can 'buy' God by presenting gifts to him. But since God is the Creator and Owner of everything, nothing we offer can enrich him. He responds not to those who try to win him over with impressive displays of ritual, but to those who, acknowledging their sin, submit humbly to him and behave mercifully towards others.²

In a world where people in general are concerned with personal gains and achievements, believers are reminded that life for them has a new element – faith. Indeed, it is the element that transforms all of life. The life of humans is already on a higher level than that of animals, partly because human intelligence is higher than animal instinct. But the image of God is not fully restored till we come into a right relation with God, and that involves faith.

Without faith no one can please God.³ This means more than exercising faith to receive salvation; it means living constantly in an attitude of faith. The important issues in life are those of 'being' more than 'doing'; that is, our relationship with God and others is more important than rituals that can be seen or measured.⁴

Prayer, according to the meaning of the proverb, though a spiritual exercise is not a religious ritual. It is something that can truly be practised only by 'the upright', whereas sacrifice can be practised even by 'the wicked'. A bad person can perform rituals, but only the true believer can properly pray.

1. Prov 15:8; 21:3; cf. Isa 1:10-17
2. Ps 50:7-15; 51:16-17; Micah 6:6-8
3. Heb 11:6
4. 2 Cor 5:7; Gal 5:25



Reading the Torah at the Western Wall, Jerusalem

Hope

In spite of all the benefits that the modern world makes available, much of the world is characterized by an absence of hope. In the West, where modern benefits are most widely available, life for many is meaningless and without hope, partly because secularism has left them with no moral or religious values. Those caught in this crisis have created the problem through their own selfishness. People in other parts of the world also are without hope, though in many cases the crisis is not of their own making. They are the helpless victims of injustice, disease, war, famine and poverty.

Christians usually see the biblical teaching about hope as something exclusively New Testament, because it is tied up with the salvation made possible through Jesus Christ and will be experienced in its fulness at his return.¹ But believers in Old Testament times also had hope, even though they may not have understood fully how God would bring his plan of salvation to completion. A theme of the psalmists was that the righteous set their hope in God.²

The teacher in Proverbs also was aware of the importance of hope. 'The hope of the righteous ends in gladness, but the expectation of the wicked comes to nothing'.³ Here is an encouragement to believers wherever they live. To those in comfortable societies it is a reminder that God's values are the only basis of lasting joy. To those who live amid suffering it is a reminder that present adversity is temporary and cannot be compared with the life that awaits them.⁴

We know the disappointment when hope is not fulfilled. 'Hope deferred makes the heart sick'.⁵ But we know also that hope, by definition, concerns things we do not yet have. It must therefore be accompanied by patience and faith. Because we 'hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience'.⁶

1 1 Thess 5:8; 1 Peter 1:13

2. Ps 33:18,22; 71:5; 146:5

3. Prov 10:28

4. Rom 8:18

5. Prov 13:12

6. Rom 8:24-25



Arrival of a new day, Sea of Galilee

Something money cannot buy

Several well-known proverbs remind us that wisdom is better than wealth – more desirable than the finest gold and the purest silver.¹ Why, then, do many Christians spend more time and effort accumulating wealth than they spend accumulating wisdom?

The wisdom spoken of in Proverbs is, in biblical language, spiritual, not worldly.² Many Christians have plenty of worldly wisdom, so much in fact that they are little different from their non-Christian fellow citizens. They show maturity in their business, professional, academic and general workaday pursuits, but in spiritual understanding they have matured little since graduating from the church youth group.

Spiritual maturity comes through spiritual wisdom, and that comes only through devoting oneself to the study and practice of God's Word. Paul's aim for his converts was to warn them and teach them in all wisdom, so that he might present them mature in Christ.³

If God, in his grace, gives people 'gold and silver', they should see that he has given them a way of helping others. Like any gift from God, wealth can be used in a right way or a wrong way. The danger is that, in seeking it, they sell their soul for something that will not last. In giving it away they make an investment that will last into the age to come.⁴

These statements do not mean that the blessings of the age to come can be measured in dollars and cents. The Bible is not encouraging people to become more concerned with money. It is showing that God's blessings may bear no relation to money. The reward of wisdom is better than gold or silver in the sense that it is something of a different character. The eye has not seen, nor the ear heard, nor the heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him – and who therefore love wisdom.⁵

1. Prov 3:14; 8:10-11; 16:16

2. 1 Cor 1:20; 2:6; 3:18-19; James 3:13-17

3. Col 1:28; cf. Eph 5:15

4. Matt 6:19-21; 1 Tim 6:17-19

5. Prov 8:17-19; cf. 1 Cor 2:9



The Bank of England

Open to the public

Immediately inside the gate of an ancient city was an area of lively activity where people gathered to chat, relax, meet friends, sell goods and conduct business. It was the place where the city elders were available to oversee business and decide cases brought before them for legal judgment,¹ and where the wise passed on teaching to the common people.²

Reputations were built, for better or for worse, by the talk that buzzed around the city gate. Everyone knew who among the city elders were just and who were corrupt, which citizens were trustworthy and which were not. Certain people became known for their sensible and helpful words, but the empty-headed had ‘nothing worthwhile to say in the gate’.³

Whatever the public reputation, it reflected upon the family. That was an important consideration to the writer of the poem recorded in Proverbs 31:10-31, a poem in praise of the ideal wife. He saw her as the perfect partner, who was dependable, kind, perceptive and conscientious. She was wise in handling affairs within the family and generous in helping the needy outside. But how would the public see her? What would be her reputation ‘in the gate’?

The writer’s response to this is that the respect people had for the woman’s husband and children was in large measure due to her. Her husband was ‘well known in the gates and sat among the elders of the land’ (v. 23), and he, like his children, was obviously well looked after at home. Their appearance and conduct reflected well on the wife and mother, so that ‘her works praised her in the gates’ (v. 31).

‘A good name is to be chosen rather than riches, and favour is better than silver or gold.’⁴ We ought not to pursue public acclaim, but we should be concerned about our reputation.

1. Ruth 4:1-2; Job 29:7-12; Prov 22:22

2. Job 29:21-25; Prov 1:20-21; 8:1-3

3. Prov 24:7

4. Prov 22:1



Damascus Gate, Jerusalem

Life-giving water

Among the contrasts of opposites we meet throughout Proverbs is the contrast between life and death. One example is the saying, 'Reverence for the Lord is a fountain of life, so that one might avoid the snares of death'.¹

The focus here, as elsewhere in the wisdom writings, is not simply that some people live and others die, but that among all the earth's inhabitants, some find the sort of life God wants for them, while others, because of their folly, miss out. They forfeit true life. They are 'dead' while they live.²

In lands where water is scarce, any supply of water is especially appreciated as being of life-giving or life-saving value. In a world where sin's life-destroying power is everywhere, the only source of true life is a right relation with God – 'reverence for the Lord'. Products of this 'fountain of life' are right speech, right knowledge and right decisions.³

All these things come from the heart, one's innermost being. That is why the heart must be 'kept with all diligence'. In a sense, it too is a 'spring of life'.⁴

Jesus used a similar picture in speaking of the life-giving blessing that he offers. It too works in a person's heart, where it is like a spring of water that bursts forth with eternal life.⁵ On another occasion he applied the same picture in a slightly different way, but once again the living water flowed out of the believer's heart.⁶ As always, a right relation with God, and specifically with Jesus Christ, is the 'fountain of life'.

1. Prov 14:27

2. Prov 5:22-23; 8:36

3. Prov 10:11; 13:14; 16:22

4. Prov 4:23

5. John 4:14

6. John 7:37-38



Waterfall, Australia

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