



Scripture Press

Disciples' *Bible Study Series*



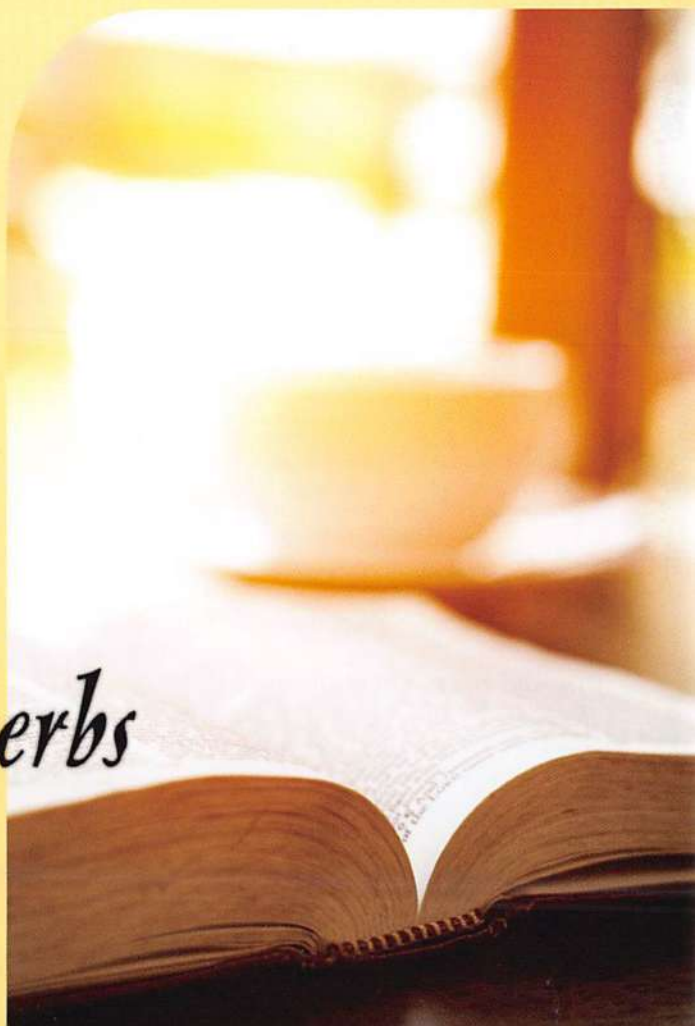
ADULT STUDENT BOOK

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STUDIES IN

Proverbs

SUMMER



POWER FOR LIVING

Here's a full-color, weekly, take-home publication that's an exciting tool for personal growth and evangelism. With life-related stories of faith, ***Power for Living*** connects God's truth to real life.

DISCIPLES' BIBLE STUDY SERIES

YEAR	SEPTEMBER QUARTER	DECEMBER QUARTER	MARCH QUARTER	JUNE QUARTER
2016-17	Acts	Genesis	1, 2 Thessalonians; Jude	Joel; Jonah; Amos; Hosea; Micah
2017-18	Luke	Exodus	1 Corinthians	Leviticus; Numbers; Deuteronomy
2018-19	Hebrews	Joshua	2 Corinthians	Isaiah
2019-20	Matthew	Judges; Ruth	1, 2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon	Jeremiah; Lamentations
2020-21	Romans	1, 2 Samuel	1, 2 Peter	Nah; Zeph.; Hab.; Obad.; Hag.; Zech.; Mal.
2021-22	John	1, 2 Kings; 1, 2 Chronicles	James; 1, 2, 3 John	Proverbs
2022-23	Philippians; Colossians	Ezra; Nehemiah; Esther	Revelation	Ezekiel; Daniel
2023-24	Mark	Psalms	Galatians; Ephesians	Job; Ecclesiastes; Song of Solomon

The Book of Proverbs

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The Book of Proverbs

Though many Christians love to quote from Proverbs, it is not an easy book to study. Studying the Book of Proverbs is much like searching through a used-book store. If you are in too much of a hurry, you will walk away empty-handed and frustrated. On the other hand, if you take your time and browse carefully, you will discover a variety of treasures that could change your life forever. Though the 500+ wise sayings recorded in this book were written almost 3,000 years ago, they still apply to modern-day situations. Though the historical and cultural details of the proverbs have changed, the truths they express are timeless.

Proverbs is a practical, down-to-earth collection of wise sayings. The proverbs offer sound advice for living a successful life. They also cover such timeless topics as drunkenness, gossip, laziness, stubbornness, friendship, and child-rearing. The Book of Proverbs is not particularly about theological ideas, but about practical, personal ethics. The writers did not attempt to prove the existence of God or explain the mysteries of His ways. God's existence and sovereignty are assumed throughout. The proverbs are not much concerned with the age to come and heavenly wonders. Instead, they focus on the here and now on planet earth.

Though the topics covered are

varied and complex, their basic approach is straightforward. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. To maintain a high moral standard in daily decisions is to demonstrate wisdom. Success is the natural by-product of integrity. Few will choose the path of wisdom—associate with those who do. Become one of them.

Proverbs is a part of what Bible scholars have called the "wisdom literature" of Scripture, along with Ecclesiastes and Job. The genre of proverbs was also well-known in the ancient world. In fact, there are a number of parallels between Proverbs 22:17–24:22 and the Egyptian "Instruction of Amenemope," which was written during roughly the same time period. There were probably several "wisdom exchanges" between Egypt and Solomon's court during Israel's golden years.

Despite being a part of the wisdom literature, Proverbs is unique among the books of the Bible. Unlike other Old Testament books, Proverbs concentrates on the responsibilities of individuals and not of nations as a whole. Other biblical books contain wise sayings, but no other book in the Bible is made up solely of proverbs. The only Scripture that compares with Proverbs's down-to-earth approach is the Letter of James in the New Testament. Like Proverbs, James emphasizes living out one's beliefs in practical ways.



Authorship and Date

The Book of Proverbs is not the work of one individual during a specific time period. Instead, it is a compilation from several writers who lived during a vast period of time. Most of the proverbs are attributed to one recognizable writer, King Solomon (Prov. 1:1). According to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon spoke some 3,000 proverbs and wrote 1,005 songs. It is reasonable to believe that a number of the sayings found in the Book of Proverbs come from Solomon's 3,000 wise sayings. Other proverbs are attributed to unfamiliar persons such as Agur and Lemuel

(Prov. 30:1; 31:1). Some proverbs are not attributed to a specific writer.

There are only two reliable reference points for dating the Book of Proverbs. One is the repeated mention of King Solomon, who lived in the tenth century B.C. The other reference point for dating the book is the mention of a collection of Solomon's proverbs compiled by King Hezekiah's committee (25:1). Since Hezekiah lived in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., we know that at least a portion of Proverbs was compiled during that time period as well.



Content and Theme

Within the company of Israel's sages the term "proverb" came to stand for any kind of wisdom saying, no matter what form it was expressed in. The forms for proverb-type sayings ranged from extended personifications to short, memorable observations about life.

The Hebrew word for "proverb" carries with it the idea of comparison. Many of the proverbs use comparison to teach their truths. A consistent theme in the Book of Proverbs is the comparison between the way of wisdom and the way of foolishness. As the book repeatedly reminds us, wisdom is always the better choice. Persons who follow the way of wisdom tend to succeed. Persons who follow the way of foolishness eventually come to ruin.

While the contrasts between the

results of wisdom versus those of foolishness are generally accurate, there are always exceptions.

There are times when godly, hardworking people do not thrive materially. Likewise, there are times when lazy, deceitful people live with an abundance of material possessions. In reading Proverbs it is best to remember that these sayings teach general rules for life. The proverbs are not promises but simply descriptions of the way things usually go.

Despite the general theme of wisdom versus foolishness, there is no clear order to the placement of the individual proverbs. Proverbs about drunkenness can be found side by side with proverbs about childrearing. In the latter chapters of the book, more proverbs are clustered

around specific topics, such as the passage about fools (Prov. 26:1-12). However, even there the use of topical clusters is not consistent.

Also, there is no consistent structure to individual proverbs. Some are longer metaphorical stories. Others are personifications of abstract ideas. Others are short

parallel statements that repeat the same idea in slightly different ways or that contrast two opposing ideas or ways of life. Some Bible scholars have spent years trying to classify the proverbs. For our purposes, we will try to concentrate on interpreting and applying the individual proverbs to everyday life.

How to Use the *Study Book*

The *Study Book* is meant to be used with a Bible opened beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the *Study Book* until you get the

meaning of the passage.

Also think about your personal answer to each of the "Ask Yourself" questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

1

The Path of Wisdom

Proverbs 1-2

a Wisdom's Rewards (1:1-7)

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

—Proverbs 1:7

The Book of Proverbs presents two paths to the reader—the way of wisdom and the way of foolishness. The path of wisdom leads to a clear conscience, meaningful relationships, and a full life. The path of foolishness leads to frustration, heartache, and eventual ruin. There's little middle ground here—a person must choose one path or the other.

The Book of Proverbs begins by naming its primary author, that is, Solomon (vs. 1). Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba. He was chosen by God to succeed his father even though Solomon was not David's oldest son. When invited by God to ask for anything he wished, Solomon requested wisdom. The new king felt ill-equipped for the task that lay ahead of him; he knew that he would need supernatural

insight and discernment to govern God's people well (see I Kings 3:1-15). The Book of Proverbs is one of the manifestations of God's answer to the king's prayer. Solomon was known all over the world for his wisdom. During Israel's golden years of prosperity and peace, foreign dignitaries, such as the queen of Sheba, traveled great distances to learn from him (see 10:1-13).

Though Solomon is mentioned as the author of Proverbs, he was not the only contributor to this book. Two men named Lemuel and Agur are given as the authors of later chapters. Other unnamed wise men added to the book as well. These other writers, however, certainly learned from and emulated Solomon's depth of insight.

Solomon's purpose in writing and collecting the proverbs was to teach wisdom and discipline (Prov. 1:2). Jewish wisdom was intensely practical in its application. Instead of the prophetic approach to preaching, which placed a heavy emphasis on right and wrong, the Jewish sages focused on how wisdom and foolishness demonstrated themselves in everyday life. To them, wisdom was ethics in action. The simple were

taught to be prudent. The young were instructed to learn from the mistakes of others and not to repeat them (vs. 4). The goal of wisdom was to live a successful life.

In addition to their attaining wisdom, Solomon wanted his readers to fully comprehend what he was teaching. Obviously a person can memorize a proverb without understanding it. Once it is understood, then it needs to be put into action. The reader must do what is right by putting feet on the lofty concepts he or she has just appropriated (vs. 3). This original verb for "receiving" carried with it the idea of whole-hearted acceptance, commitment, and willingness to incorporate new insights into one's life.

For this reason we must go beyond simply understanding the parables by asking ourselves, *Now what should I do with this?*—and then act upon the answer.

Wisdom that is not embraced and put into practice will eventually be lost. **Wisdom is the application of knowledge; obedience is the application of wisdom.** Only when wisdom is acquired and put into action can more wisdom be gained (vs. 5). The "riddles" (vs. 6) Solomon described may have been wise sayings that were indirect in their application. During her visit with Solomon, the queen of Sheba posed many riddles to the king that he answered skillfully (see 1 Kings 10:1).

Though Solomon knew and understood the importance of putting one's wisdom into action, he failed to fully acquire what he

What Happened to Solomon?

Deuteronomy 17:14-20 lists three sins that a king of Israel was to avoid. One was not to accumulate great amounts of wealth. A second was not to build a massive military, especially a large cavalry. And the last was not to have multiple wives. These commands were intended to prevent the king from losing his sense of dependence upon God.

By the end of Solomon's 40-year reign, he had broken all three of these commands to a degree that defies comprehension. In his empire, silver seemed as common as stones. Yet Solomon continued to demand tribute from the numerous kingdoms and imposed heavy taxes on his own people. His military arsenal included 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen. His 700 wives and 300 concubines led him away from Yahweh and into the worship of foreign gods.

Because Solomon ignored these three commands, he lost his sense of dependence upon God—and his successor lost the kingdom.

wrote. Later in his life he neglected his gift of wisdom and drifted away from God. Solomon eventually violated most of the proverbs he wrote. It all began when he compromised his faith to please his foreign wives. Later in life he suffered the consequences of the foolishness about which he had so eloquently warned others. The kingdom of Israel eventually divided because of Solomon's faithlessness (and the willingness of the people to follow him in his folly). Some believe the Book of Ecclesiastes is a self-evaluation of Solomon's foolish choices in life.

Does Solomon's spiritual descent mean that we should not take his proverbs seriously? Not at all. Rather, his example should compel us to make the application of his insights a top priority in our lives.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I avoid the spiritual drifting that Solomon experienced?*

The reverent fear of God is the starting point of all Hebrew wisdom (Prov. 1:7). This respect of Yahweh is what sets biblical wisdom apart from all its worldly counterparts. This foundational truth is repeated throughout the wisdom literature of the Bible (see Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10; 15:33; Eccl. 12:13).

What does "the fear of the LORD" (Prov. 1:7a) mean? Fearing God is not an irrational feeling of dread and impending doom. On the other hand, it is more than courteous reverence. In the words of Pastor John Piper, the fear of the Lord is "a sweet trembling" that comes from a

deep awareness of God's sovereignty and power. God is to be revered in awe and obeyed unconditionally.

In contrast to the wise who fear the Lord are the fools who take Him lightly (vs. 7b). Solomon's brothers Adonijah, Amnon, and Absalom were certainly examples of men who despised their father's teaching. Fools like these reject the wisdom and discipline of God and depend upon their own immature ways of thinking. The foolish goals of these brothers of Solomon were power and control. Consequently each one of them met an ignoble death.

Truly, fearing God is the beginning of wisdom.



Dangerous Friendships (1:8-19)

**These men lie in wait for their own blood;
they ambush only themselves!
Such are the paths of all who go after
ill-gotten gain; it takes away
the life of those who get it.**

—Proverbs 1:18, 19

Solomon began this second section by addressing his "son" (vs. 8) with a teaching that reflects the fifth commandment (to honor one's father and mother). The phrase "my son" was the customary way to address a student or a disciple. The phrase occurs multiple times in the Proverbs, and it was unlikely that

Solomon was addressing only his own biological son in this passage.

Solomon promised his student that if he listened to his parents and followed their instruction, he would stand out among others. Their teachings, if followed, would wear well. Solomon used the metaphors of a garland and necklace to describe the reputation of the one who honors his or her parents (vss. 8, 9).

The remainder of this section deals with the timeless problems of peer pressure and violence. The lure of gangs bent on violence and quick money was as much a problem in ancient Jerusalem as it is in our cities today. Though the weaponry has changed, sinful human nature has not. Solomon's admonitions to stay away from thugs certainly has relevance for young people today.

The sinners Solomon mentioned included anyone who chose to ignore the way of wisdom (vs. 10). The king repeatedly reminded his student to beware of such people. Though their lifestyle might have appeared attractive, they were heading straight for personal destruction.

How should the student respond to their appeals to join them in their attack on the weak and vulnerable? He should refuse to associate with them as soon as he knows their intentions (vs. 15). Solomon did not tell his student to explain the reason for his refusal or debate the merits of wisdom with the sinner. The king realized early in life that it was a waste of time to argue with a fool who was bent on being destructive.



A Roman sculpture of Dionysus wearing a vine garland. Solomon admonished his student to wear his parent's instructions like a garland on his head.

What did these violent friends offer that might entice the young man? They offered him quick money, crime without consequences, and a place to belong. These dangerous friends planned to steal from outsiders, but promised to share with each other (vss. 11-14). They might murder innocent people, but pledged to pro-

tect each other. After a while, one might begin to wonder how long he would be able to trust these people—how long before they perceived the new guy as vulnerable?

A promised sense of community, no matter how unstable, is often more enticing to young people than anything else you can offer them. This is the modern-day appeal of many gangs and even some of the cults. All people, regardless of their economic or social status, want to feel like they belong. Even persons who normally disdain violence can be tempted to join in the brutal behavior of a group if it means being accepted.

Ask Yourself . . . *From whom do I get my deepest sense of belonging?*

The student was to refuse to join these rogues because they would eventually be destroyed by their own violence. Even birds are smart enough not to be captured in a net they see being set up (vss. 17-18). Not so with these schemers. Violence and greed have a way of blinding the ones who embrace these vices.

As Solomon pointed out, they would probably die as violently as the persons they had robbed (vss. 16-18). Their so-called community would collapse the moment their illusions of safety were shattered. Even if they lived to a ripe old age surrounded by wealth, their lives would have been filled with bitterness, distrust, and fear.

This warning by Solomon about dangerous friends was especially

ironic in respect to his own son Rehoboam. After Solomon's death, Rehoboam became king in his place. The young man refused to follow his father's teaching and the admonitions of Solomon's most trusted advisers. Instead, he followed the counsel of his violence-prone friends. The result was bloodshed and the division of the kingdom (1 Kings 12). Solomon may have even had Rehoboam in mind as he penned these words. Unfortunately, his warnings fell on deaf ears.

Ask Yourself . . . *Whose advice do I trust the most? Why?*



Wisdom's Call (1:20-27)

**Out in the open wisdom calls aloud,
she raises her voice in the public
square;
on top of the wall she cries out,
at the city gate she makes her
speech.**

—Proverbs 1:20, 21

This passage is the first of three in Proverbs in which wisdom is personified (see also 8; 9:1-6). In the Proverbs 8 passage, Wisdom is portrayed as a craftsman who was by the Lord's side during Creation. For this reason, many believe Wisdom personified in the Proverbs to be a description of the preincarnate Christ. It is not hard to imagine the Lord Himself speaking throughout

these verses. He was calling His children to repentance. He was calling them back from the edge of self-destruction caused by their rejection of wisdom.

Wisdom does not whisper her message. She shouts it out so that all can hear her. She does not proclaim her message from the wilderness but within the most populated areas of human life—the gates of the city. There she is always available for any situation people might face—in business, in the home, or in relationships. Because of her chosen location, it would have been impossible to enter or exit the city without hearing her call to repentance. If she was going to be ignored, a person would

have to make a deliberate decision to do so (1:20-21).

Ask Yourself . . . *What would Wisdom say to me?*

The question was not “Will she be heard?” but rather “Will she be heeded?” Wisdom called to the simple, the fools, and the mockers (vs. 22). Dan Allender, in his book *Bold Love*, sees a clear distinction among these three types of people. The simple are normal sinners who are the most capable of seeing the error of their ways and repenting. Fools tend to be impulsively angry people bent on controlling others and often demand conformity to their way of doing things. The mocker is a cal-

The Wise Men of Israel

Wisdom made herself known at the city gate (Prov. 1:21). One of the ways she manifested herself was through the wise men of Israel, who often met at the city gates. The cultural life of Israel was molded by three groups of leaders: prophets, priests, and wise men. The prophets (such as Isaiah and Ezekiel) taught about obedience, justice, and repentance. The priests performed the ceremonies, rituals, and sacrifices. The wise men spoke about wisdom, practical matters, and successful living.

Though as a group they never had the power of the prophets or the priests, the wise men helped mold the development of Israel at the grassroots level. Many of them were elders, such as Job, who would share their wisdom at the city gate. These wise men often formed academies to teach young men the wisdom that would make them successful in later life. Unlike the wise men of other empires, these sages of Israel emphasized that the basis of all wisdom was the fear of God.

loused evil person who not only wants control but seeks to destroy the spirits of those he or she scoffs at. None of these three types are beyond redemption—some are simply more deeply entrenched in their ways than others.

Apparently these three types of people had been ignoring Wisdom's call for a long period of time. She kept asking how long they would continue in their foolishness. She offered them wisdom in exchange for empty ways of thinking. Her wisdom would make up for what they lacked in ability and discernment. All they had to bring to the table was the desire to know wisdom. Like the salvation preached by Jesus, wisdom was easy to request. However, like the gift of salvation, she was also often refused (vss. 22, 23).

The refusal of the fools to repent left Wisdom no choice but to let judgment take its course. The judgment she pronounced was not something she would actively implement. Wisdom would not be the cause of their suffering. Instead, she would watch, with scorn and derision, as these people were overwhelmed by the natural and logical consequences of their actions (vss. 24-27).

Many people are bitter toward God because of their difficult and painful circumstances when, in fact, the Lord has done nothing to cause their hardship. In many cases, He has simply stepped back and allowed sin to take its course. He is constantly at the ready, however, to

rescue those who respond to their self-imposed trials with a contrite and broken spirit. The first step they must take is to acknowledge that they are the source of their own problems.

d Wisdom's Offer (1:28-33)

The waywardness of the simple
will kill them,
and the complacency of fools
will destroy them;
but whoever listens to me
[Wisdom] will live in safety
and be at ease, without fear of
harm.

—Proverbs 1:32, 33

Even God's patience has its limits. No matter how much the simpletons, fools, and mockers cried out for reprieve, Wisdom would not respond. They ignored her when she called. Likewise, she would not respond to them when they eventually asked to be rescued (vs. 28).

These people had despised the riches Wisdom offered them. They refused to acknowledge God's sovereignty over their lives. They treated advice and correction with contempt. Because of their foolishness, they would eventually reap a harvest of chaos that they had been sowing all their lives (vss. 29-31).

Wisdom warned that the complacency of fools would eventually destroy them. *Merriam-Webster's*

Collegiate Dictionary defines complacency as “self-satisfaction accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies.” Wisdom had attempted to alert these people to the dangers and deficiencies of their thinking, but they continued to tune her out (vs. 32).

Wisdom had forewarned the reader about the punishments that these fools would receive. There was still time for others, however, to repent. Those who listened to Wisdom would be protected from paralyzing insecurities, anxiety, and fear—all the consequences of a foolish lifestyle (vs. 33).

Asking God for wisdom is the one prayer request that is virtually guaranteed to be fulfilled. The apostle James made it clear that anyone who asks for wisdom, in faith, will receive it (see Jas. 1:5). Once we have been given wisdom, however, we have to put it into action—or else it becomes nothing more than an interesting topic of conversation.

Ask Yourself . . . *What will I need wisdom for today?*

Proverbs 2 in Brief

Solomon encouraged his student to seek wisdom as one would seek a hidden treasure. He was careful to point out that, though wisdom can be sought through human effort, finding it is a gift from God. Wisdom, like salvation, cannot be earned. True wisdom leaves no room for pride. The rewards of this God-given wisdom include continual growth, an ability to discern between right and wrong, and protection from the plans of evil people.

Solomon described how wisdom can protect a person from adulterous women as well as evil men. The adulteress is an insincere flatterer. She is unfaithful to her husband and to God. To succumb to her temptations brings suffering, ruin, and possibly even death.

Solomon closed the chapter by contrasting the results of wickedness and those of righteousness. The righteous live full, prosperous lives. The wicked are cut off from the benefits of righteous living.

2

Things to Remember

Proverbs 3—5

a The Rewards of Wisdom (3:1-10)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own
understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.
—Proverbs 3:5, 6

Solomon listed five admonitions in the first ten verses of chapter 3. Each of these exhortations is followed by a promised reward for those who obey it. Like all the Hebrew teachers of wisdom, the king was careful to emphasize that every action has a natural and logical consequence. Wise actions will be rewarded; foolish actions will be punished.

Solomon began by reminding his student about the importance of keeping these teachings at the forefront of the student's memory. The word he used for "teaching" in this instance (vs. 1) is the Hebrew term "torah." This term is also used for the first five books of the Old Testament. The same word is also used for divine law. In this instance the king used the word to communicate

a standard or direction. Solomon wanted his student to use his teachings as a guide to navigate along the way of wisdom.

Solomon emphasized the importance of his student keeping these teachings in his heart. This concept carried with it the idea of embracing and actively putting into practice what the student had learned from the teacher. James repeated this same truth centuries later when he wrote that faith without deeds is dead (see Jas. 2:26).

The result of keeping these commands would be a long and full life. Generally speaking (though not in every case), the wise live longer than the foolish. In addition to a longer life, the obediently wise person would have a fuller and more meaningful existence. "Prosperity" (Prov. 3:2) could mean actual wealth, or in a broader sense, an increased sense of purpose and significance.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I experienced a richer life by following the path of wisdom?*

The second admonition encouraged the student to hold on to love and faithfulness. The terms "love" and "faithfulness" were two words

that consistently showed up in God's covenants with His people. The Hebrew word for "love" here, *hesed*, was often used to describe faithfulness in a relationship. Love and faithfulness add up to integrity.

The best way to hold on to the precepts of integrity was to "bind them around your neck" and "write them on the tablet of [the] heart" (vs. 3). Solomon wanted his student to wear these precepts like a necklace so that they would always figuratively be in front of the student. The writing of these precepts on the tablet of the heart is reflected in the new covenant as it is described by Jeremiah, "'This is the covenant I will make with the people 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'" (Jer. 31:33). These precepts were to be inscribed on the student's heart. In other words, love and faithfulness should be practiced so frequently that they become second nature.

Ask Yourself . . . *What wise actions have become habits for me?*

The rewards of integrity include the favor of God and a reputation for trustworthiness (Prov. 3:4). Solomon's words are echoed in the description given of Christ as a maturing young man: "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

Solomon's third admonition in this section is to wholly trust God—to acknowledge Him and to seek His counsel when making plans.

The king told his student to avoid putting all of his confidence into his own understanding. This did not mean that the student was to completely set aside his own knowledge and experience. It would be foolish to think that after spending years teaching a student wisdom, Solomon would then tell him to forsake everything he had learned. Instead, the king was reminding his pupil to acknowledge the source of his wisdom and experience—and to humbly admit there was more the Lord could teach him (Prov. 3:5).

The person who trusts God in this manner will be rewarded with a path made straight. The image here is one of the Lord clearing obstacles from the student's path. A person seeing the hilly countryside around Jerusalem would have appreciated this metaphor of a straight path. Though the actual distance between some of the towns around Jerusalem was short, traveling on foot was often arduous. The hills of Israel had to be traveled around or climbed over. In a similar way, the Lord will clear a spiritual path for those who trust in Him (vs. 6).

The fourth admonition is a call to humility. This manifested itself in fearing God and avoiding evil (vs. 7). Solomon may have intended to parallel these thoughts with those in verses 5 and 6. To be wise in your own eyes is similar to leaning on your own understanding. To fear God means to trust Him completely in all things.

The reward of being humble and avoiding evil is physical health

(vs. 8). Again, Solomon was not making a promise here, but spelling out a general principle. Some of the most humble servants in God's kingdom have struggled with chronic pain all their lives. The absence of physical health, however, stands in stark contrast to the fitness of their souls.

Many physicians unknowingly repeat Solomon's wise advice today. They understand that many physical ailments can be blamed on stress. Stress, in turn, often comes from trusting in our own limited wisdom instead of turning to God.

The last admonition in this section has to do with the use of material possessions. Solomon told his student to follow the offering principles in Deuteronomy 26 and give to God the firstfruits of everything he produced (Prov. 3:9). Such an act was not to be done grudgingly, but as an expression of reverence for God.

Everything we have belongs to God and comes from God anyway.

Offering Him the firstfruits is a way of constantly reminding ourselves of these truths.

The reward for following this teaching is a material one. The student, Solomon said, would be blessed with wealth in return for his faithfulness in giving. The bulging barns and overflowing vats symbolized that the student would have more resources than he could ever use (vs. 10). Such a teaching would certainly have impacted any student who saw the wealth of Solomon.

We must be careful here, however, that we do not give to God sim-

Solomon said that God would make straight the paths of those who acknowledge the Lord in their plans (Prov. 3:6). A straight path to walk would have been a welcome change in the hilly countryside around Jerusalem.



Earth Barns

Solomon said that the person who honored the Lord with his or her wealth would experience barns filled to overflowing (Prov. 3:10). Barns in Bible times did not resemble the red structures we often see in the countryside. Instead, barns in the ancient Middle East were often just pits in the ground, usually covered with a thick layer of earth for protection. Grain could be stored for years under such conditions.

ply in order to get back from Him. Solomon made it clear that the only proper motive for giving is to honor the Lord. Whether or not we see an increase in our resources after years of faithful giving, we can be assured that there will be many treasures laid up for us in heaven.

Ask Yourself . . . *What motivates me to give?*



The Value of Wisdom (3:11-20)

**Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain understanding.**
—Proverbs 3:13

What happens to kids who are not disciplined by their parents? They often become rebellious and rude. They usually lose respect for their moms and dads because their parents refused to set any reasonable boundaries for them—or to spell out any consequences for their misbehavior.

Solomon began this section by talking about the Lord's discipline. The king instructed his student not to recoil from the Lord's instruction, training, and correction, because they are an indication of His deep parental love (vss. 11, 12). The writer of Hebrews quoted these verses to support the notion that God's discipline is always for our good (see Heb. 12:5, 6).

To Solomon, hardship was a small price to pay for something as valuable as wisdom. Many Israelites believed that God sent a person difficulties as a way of correcting poor behavior or as a test of that person's loyalty to Him. The student was warned not to resent God when He allowed hardship to come his way. Instead, he was to gain a sense of security knowing that God loved him enough to discipline him.

Ask Yourself . . . *Does my perspective of God change when He is disciplining me? If so, how?*

After teaching about the difficult experiences one might go through to receive wisdom, Solomon poetically described wisdom's benefits. The Hebrew term "blessed," or happy, is equivalent to the Greek term used in the Beatitudes (Prov. 3:13; see Matt. 5:1-12). According to Solomon, attaining wisdom (not ignorance) was bliss.

Solomon knew that the happiness wisdom brings is worth even more than the material wealth he referred to in Proverbs 3:10. Jesus expanded upon this concept when He taught that while earthly wealth can be lost, stolen, or suffer decay, heavenly wealth lasts forever (vss. 14, 15; see Matt. 6:19, 20). We can see this truth demonstrated in Solomon's request for wisdom. He could have asked for fame, wealth, or power. By first seeking wisdom, however, he gained these other things as well.

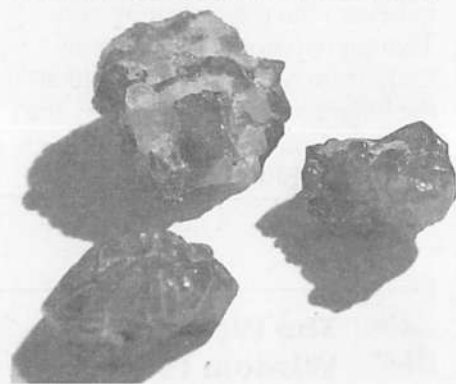
Though Solomon desired wisdom more than a long life and great wealth, he wasn't opposed to either of these things. He was just keeping his priorities in line. The less stressful, more healthy lifestyle that wisdom called for would improve his chances for long, healthy years. He also realized that being a wise and honest businessman would allow him greater opportunities to acquire material wealth—money that he did not have to feel guilty about.

The fact that he placed long life in Wisdom's right hand, the place

of highest honor, symbolized that a long, full life was to be valued above great wealth. Peace and happiness also came with wisdom. By calling Wisdom "a tree of life" (Prov. 3:18), Solomon alluded to the tree mentioned in the Garden of Eden (see Gen. 2—3). Since reentering Eden was now impossible, the student could approach this desired tree by means of Lady Wisdom (Prov. 3:16-18).

Ask Yourself . . . *Compared with the other things I pursue in life, how important is attaining wisdom to me?*

Wisdom is valuable to God. He used wisdom, understanding, and



Uncut, unpolished ruby stones. Solomon thought wisdom far more precious than rubies (Prov. 3:15). Rubies are the rarest and costliest of gems. Ounce for ounce, they are worth more than diamonds. Rubies are made of a mineral called corundum, which is colorless in its pure state. A trace of a chromium oxide impurity gives the ruby its typically red color. Sapphires are another colored variety of this mineral.



knowledge as tools in His creation. In these verses, wisdom is described as a manifestation of God's power (vss. 19, 20).

The same wisdom that laid the earth's foundations and set the heavens in place is available to any believer who requests it by faith. Though we cannot create something from nothing as God did at the beginning of the world, by the Lord's wisdom we can shape lives for His kingdom.

Solomon compared wisdom to the tree of life (Prov. 3:18). In Genesis, the tree of life was guarded by angels after the fall of Adam and Eve. The tree of life, flanked by guardian cherubim, was frequently portrayed in Mesopotamian art. This drawing shows a scene carved on the side of an ivory box from Nimrud, dating from about the eighth century B.C. The tree of life in the middle is depicted as a date palm.

C The Warnings of Wisdom (3:21-35)

**Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to act.**
—Proverbs 3:27

Solomon again encouraged his student to hold on to sound judgment and discernment. The term in vs. 21 that refers to discernment carried with it the idea of being

thoughtful about your actions and prudent about who you confide in. Jesus emphasized the need for this type of discretion when He warned about casting pearls before swine (see Matt. 7:6).

Solomon addressed the subject of showing good judgment over 15 times in the Proverbs. Why did Solomon repeat this admonition so often? One of the reasons was because the king understood the value of creative repetition. Those who hear the same thing from different angles have a better chance of internalizing it. As a result, these internalized lessons would become life to that person's

soul (Prov. 3:22). Once internalized, that same truth would more likely be applied in real life.

The results of showing judgment and discretion would be a sense of calm and poise as one walks through life. The sleep of the wise person tends to be sweet, not pock-marked by nightmares. There is an air of confidence about the wise person—he or she tends not to be distracted by insecurities and fears about the future. It is important to note that this person's confidence does not come from his or her own strength but from God's power and concern for this person's welfare (vss. 23-26).

Much of the advertising we see today seems to play on our insecurities and fears. Some of these commercials seem to say, "Will you really be as happy, important, or effective without this particular product? Better to have it and be safe rather than be caught off guard without it. Do you really have enough insurance? Are your investments sufficiently protected?" The person who has no confidence in God will often struggle with insomnia, a myriad of phobias, and intense feelings of loneliness. With the wisdom of God we can face the future with confidence, regardless of our circumstances.

Ask Yourself . . . *How strong is my confidence in God?*

After reminding his student about the origin of true security, Solomon challenged him to be a positive force in society in response to that

security. His first two exhortations challenged the student to actively serve his fellow human being. If a person was in a position to help someone in need, he or she was to do so immediately. Procrastination was not a valid option (vss. 27, 28). Doing good was not a matter of convenience or feeling like it. It was strictly a matter of active obedience.

The next exhortation warned the student not to take advantage of someone who had placed his or her trust in him. Considering the disastrous consequences of the political infighting and intrigue in David's court, it was not surprising that Solomon would teach against such subterfuge and betrayal (vs. 29).

Solomon's next proverb warns against stirring up conflict. Solomon was aware that there are times in life when strife cannot be avoided. Solomon had to battle his brother Adonijah for David's throne—even after God had clearly chosen Solomon. However, he warned his student not to pick a fight unnecessarily. He followed this advice by encouraging his student to find godly, nonviolent role models to follow (vss. 30, 31).

Ask Yourself . . . *What's usually my first reaction when I see conflict approaching?*

Solomon closed chapter 3 by contrasting the Lord's attitude toward the wicked with His attitude toward the righteous. God detests the wicked but has a friendly, intimate relationship with the righteous. The home of the wicked is cursed with bitterness and distrust. The home

of the righteous is blessed with contentment and love. The proud cannot receive God's kindness, but the humble receive His grace overflowing. The wise who walk with God will be respected. The fool who ignores God's laws will be known for the dishonorable person he or she is (vss. 32-35).

Chapters 4—5 in Brief

In chapter 4, Solomon recalled when he first received teaching from his father and mother. He was taught at a young age to seek knowledge and wisdom with all his heart.

Following these memories from his youth, Solomon warned his own student to avoid the company of violent, evil men. If the student followed such men, he would become lost in their darkness. If he held on to righteousness, he could walk safely in the light. Solomon knew that even powerful kings could be strongly influenced by peer pressure. The wise choice of friends and advisers could make a king great. Likewise, a poor choice of advisers could ruin a leader's effectiveness.

Solomon closed the chapter by reminding his student that acquiring wisdom, like following God, is a process. He realized that acting with wisdom in the past does not guarantee that the person will continue to act with wisdom in the future.

Solomon began chapter 5 with a warning to his student about committing adultery. Despite the adulteress's beauty and charms, any relationship with her would destroy his body and soul—not to mention the most significant relationships in his life.

Solomon told his student that the best way not to fall under her spell was to stay as far away from her as possible. He knew that it is easier to stay away from temptation than to walk away from it after it is encountered.

Solomon closed the chapter by emphasizing the positive aspect of fidelity. The best way to stay away from a prostitute is to be totally invested in one's own spouse. If the student had a fulfilling relationship at home, he would be less likely to stray toward the adulteress.

3

Traps to Anticipate

Proverbs 6—7

a The Problem with Procrastination (6:1-11)

A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to
rest—
and poverty will come on you like
a thief
and scarcity like an armed man.
—Proverbs 6:10, 11

While some of the proverbs encourage us to cling to certain things (such as wisdom, understanding, and insight), other proverbs tell us to avoid other things. In this lesson's passages, Solomon cautioned his student to shun precarious pledges, consistent laziness, wicked people, and adulterous relationships.

First, Solomon warned his student, if the student had accepted responsibility for another person's debt, to find a way out of the agreement as soon as possible. While such a request might be embarrassing, it was much better than bearing someone else's financial burden. Such an agreement was sealed by

taking a verbal oath and striking hands, which was the equivalent of a modern handshake used to affirm a contractual agreement (vs. 1). A modern-day parallel to putting up security would be co-signing for another person's loan.

Solomon was concerned about such agreements because of the potentially damaging consequences that awaited the guarantor of the debt if the debtor failed to pay up. The result could be poverty, slavery, or even imprisonment for the guarantor. That is why Solomon used terms such as "trapped" and "ensnared" when he described taking such an oath (vs. 2).

An example of putting up security for another is recorded in Genesis 43:9, in which Judah agreed to guarantee Benjamin's safe return from Egypt to his father. If Judah failed to bring Benjamin safely home, he would accept full responsibility for his younger brother's absence. Most likely the cost would have been his entire inheritance. When it appeared that Benjamin would be detained by Joseph, Judah offered himself to Joseph as a slave to ensure Benjamin's release. Better to temporarily be a slave in Egypt than to be

permanently dispossessed in Israel.

In Solomon's day, the guarantor of a debt had to be released from his or her obligation not only by the creditor, but also by the person who had accepted the debt. This left the guarantor at the mercy of the very person he or she agreed to help. If the debtor repaid the debt, the guarantor was free. If the debtor agreed to release the guarantor from responsibility for the debt, the guarantor was free. If the debtor failed to repay the debt and refused to release the guarantor from their agreement, the guarantor could lose all he or she possessed and perhaps even be sold into slavery—along with his or her family.

Since it was not in the debtor's best interest to release the guarantor from the agreement, such a discharge was unlikely. Solomon's suggestion to the ensnared individual was to first beg for mercy from the debtor. If that approach failed, the person should persist in pleading until he or she was released. The guarantor's attitude through this process should be like that of a trapped animal desperate for release (Prov. 6:3-5).

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I enslaved by any bad debts or obligations?*

Solomon's knowledge was not limited to questions of banking, philosophy, and law. He also was a student of nature. He made detailed studies of various plants and animals (see I Kings 4:33). Therefore it is not surprising that he made use of his nature studies when he wrote

certain proverbs. In Proverbs 6:6-11 Solomon used an ant as an illustration of an industrious worker.

The ant Solomon alluded to was probably the harvester ant, which

A Colony of Hard Workers

Proverbs 6:6-8 and 30:25 are the only places in Scripture where ants are mentioned. Ants are social creatures and can live in communities that sometimes number more than 500,000. All worker ants are females. Only the queen and the males have wings—the female workers generally do not. Ants “smell” with their antennae—they use this sense to identify ants from their own colony.

In large numbers, ants can be aggressive. They often wage war on other ant colonies and even enslave surviving prisoners.

was common in Israel. He strongly encouraged the sluggard, a type of person renowned for a lifestyle of laziness, to study the ant's work habits. He also challenged the slacker to mimic the ant's consistently productive behavior (vs. 6). This type of person was too lazy to take care of even his or her basic needs. Solomon had little sympathy for the individual who was able to work but refused.

According to Solomon, the ant outperformed the lazy person in two significant ways. First, the ant was self-motivated. It did not need an overseer to prod it into being productive and responsible. Second, the ant had the wisdom and organizational ability to accomplish its work in an efficient and timely manner (vss. 7, 8).

Solomon expressed his frustration with the slacker by demanding to know when this person planned to get out of bed and start contributing. The little things the low-energy procrastinator put off today would grow to larger things tomorrow. Eventually, the sluggard would be hopelessly hungry and impoverished (vss. 9, 10).

Ask Yourself . . . *What have I been putting off that I should deal with this week—perhaps even today?*

Perhaps the saddest part of the loafer's dilemma would be that he or she never saw the disastrous results of the decision to procrastinate. By then it would be too late to recover from the loss. The lazy person would suffer and probably

never understand why. The slacker would feel robbed instead of realizing that his or her own laziness was at fault. The loafer would probably then react as a victim, blaming others for his or her plight and expecting others to come to the rescue (vs. 11). Meanwhile, the prudent ant would continue to thrive because it had planned for the future.



The Turmoil of Troublemakers (6:12-19)

Disaster will overtake [the troublemaker] in an instant; he will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.

—Proverbs 6:15

A sluggard tended to harm himself or herself through neglect. The next type of person Solomon described, the troublemaker, deliberately harmed others. This type of person takes pleasure in destroying people's lives. According to Solomon, such wicked people did not even have to speak to spread their evil. Sometimes a slight gesture was all they needed to accomplish their corrupt intentions (vss 12-13).

The troublemaker Solomon described was someone who intentionally caused conflict—and enjoyed doing so. This person purposely misrepresented the truth in order to bring about division and

strife. The rascal's intention was to create a type of chaos to feel like he or she was the only one in control. People like this usually love the problems they stir up because they are able to profit from the resulting dissension.

Solomon's detailed description of such a person was probably taken from his administrative experiences in the royal court. Certainly the description of this person sounds much like Solomon's half brother Absalom. Absalom cunningly brought civil war to Israel in an attempt to overthrow his father, David (vs. 14; see II Sam. 15:1-12). The troublemaker would receive a sudden and violent end for his or her crimes (Prov. 6:15). This truth was reflected in Absalom's demise; he suffered brutal consequences for his conspiracy against his father at the hand of Joab (see II Sam. 18:14-15).

Solomon used a poem in Proverbs 6:16-19 to elaborate on his warnings about lifelong troublemakers. It is unknown if Solomon wrote this poem himself or used an already existing poem to emphasize his point. In either instance, cataloguing items on the basis of "number" and "number plus one" was a common literary device used by the writers of wisdom literature (see Job 5:19; Prov. 30:15, 18, 21, 29). They probably used such devices to capture the attention of their students and to more easily organize their thoughts (Prov. 6:16).

The seven items Solomon listed summarize the Lord's harsh feelings about those who purposely stir up trouble. An arrogant look mirrors a proud heart that does not fear Yahweh and reflects brazen ambition bent on personal gain and the destruction of what is valuable to others. Old Testament prophets used these words to describe the arrogant kings of Assyria and Egypt (see Isa. 10:12-14; Dan. 11:12). The psalmist used the words "lying tongue" (Prov. 6:17; see Ps. 109:2) to describe someone who betrays in order to personally profit. This particular psalm was later used to describe Judas (see Acts 1:20). "Feet that are quick to rush into evil" (Prov. 6:18) describes the enthusiasm with which the evil person carries out his or her plans to hurt others.

Ask Yourself . . . *What are seven things that I hate?*

Persons prone to deception, violence, and other evil acts are detestable to God. When such a person stirs up unnecessary conflict, he or she will eventually be judged harshly by God. By implying that God despised the actions of these persons, the king implied that his student should stay away from them as well.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I know a scoundrel who I am better off avoiding?*

C Warning against Infidelity (6:20-29)

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

Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched?
So is he who sleeps with another
man's wife;
no one who touches her will go
unpunished.

—Proverbs 6:27-29

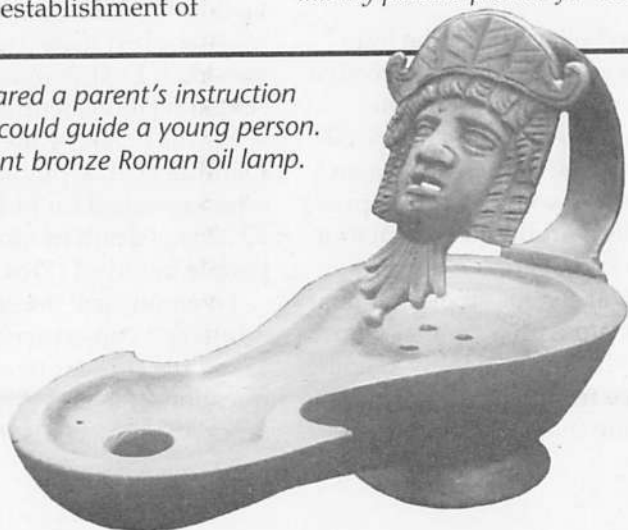
Solomon believed that wisdom was to be primarily taught by the student's father and mother. Though the king acknowledged that other teachers might have a profound influence on a young person, he insisted that the fundamental responsibility for a child's education rested upon the parents. God has placed parents in a strategic position to mold their children's characters and ability to think biblically. The process of character development starts with the establishment of

godly values. Parents do this by actively modeling the ways of righteousness. Solomon viewed both parents as being vital in this teaching and modeling mission God has ordained (vs. 20). It is no wonder that kids who come from homes where one parent is gone often suffer a lack of wisdom. When a parent is missing, mature Christians should do what they can to fill that void.

The king encouraged his student to remember and put into practice what his parents had taught him while he was growing up. He was to embrace the teachings until they became a part of his personality (vs. 21). To embrace biblical principles for living, the student must think about them continually and apply them whenever appropriate. The appropriation of wisdom cannot be accomplished by passing a multiple-choice test or memorizing a creed. Wisdom becomes a part of us only when we use it when making daily decisions, even in mundane matters.

Ask Yourself . . . *What tools for life did my parents provide for me?*

Solomon compared a parent's instruction to a lamp that could guide a young person. This is an ancient bronze Roman oil lamp.



Solomon promised that once the student truly embraced what he was taught, wisdom would guide him, shape his dreams, and be there for him when he woke up in the morning. Since he had made wisdom a part of his personality, the student could take the wisdom he acquired wherever he went. In some instances he might not have time to think; his actions would be automatic. However, even his instinctual reactions to crisis situations would be affected by his training in knowledge and wisdom (vs. 22).

Solomon echoed Psalm 119:105, where the psalmist asserted that the truth of God serves as a lamp to give light to the seeker's path. Solomon liked to use the imagery of light when he discussed the illuminating nature of wisdom (see Prov. 4:18; 13:9). In addition to lighting our path, wisdom also corrects us when we stray from the way we should go. **The corrective ways of God's discipline are always instructive and redemptive—they are never applied merely for the sake of punishment (6:23).**

Solomon believed that the light of God's wisdom and His corrective discipline would protect his student from the temptation of sexual immorality. The seductive woman he wrote about so often both represented a flesh-and-blood temptation and was a symbol of foolishness. Solomon warned his student to not even associate with a woman who had these characteristics. By keeping his distance from her, the inexperienced young man could not as eas-

ily be tempted by her alluring words and appearance. He encouraged his student not to let his thoughts dwell on her; that would likely lead to lust—which always precedes consummated sexual sin (vss. 24, 25).

At this point, Solomon differentiated between two types of immoral women—the prostitute and the adulteress. Associating with a prostitute could cost the student his wealth and reputation. Seeing her could become like an expensive addiction that would eventually lead to physical, spiritual, and economic bankruptcy.

Though such a price was high, associating with the adulteress was even more deadly. Entering into a sexual relationship with a woman who was married to someone else might very well cost the young man his life. During Solomon's time, prostitution was considered immoral but the assigned penalty was not always carried out. On the other hand, adultery was considered not only immoral but also an offense against the adulterer's spouse and against God. The Lord created the marriage bed to be a sacred place (see Heb. 13:4). A man who had sexual relations with another man's wife was breaking the seventh commandment. The punishment for adultery called for in Deuteronomy 22:22 was death by stoning for both people involved (Prov. 6:26).

To emphasize the severity of adultery's consequences, Solomon asked his student two unusual questions. He asked if a man could scoop burning coals into his lap, or

walk on those coals, and not expect to be burned. The obvious answer to both questions was no. In the same way, no man could commit adultery and expect not to suffer the dire consequences. The fire of his passion would eventually consume him (vss. 27-29).

Of course, Solomon's warnings against adultery apply equally to women and men.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I playing with fire?*



The Rage of the Betrayed (6:30-35)

**Jealousy arouses a husband's fury,
and he will show no mercy when
he takes revenge.**

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

—Proverbs 6:34, 35

Solomon continued his warnings about adultery by focusing on the angry reaction of the adulteress's husband.

Culturally speaking, an adulterer was more despised than a robber. Most people can understand the motives of a thief who steals because he or she is hungry. Though the person must still be punished, it is easier to have compassion for someone in this plight. Despite this sympathy, however, a

condemned thief must make restitution by replacing what he or she had stolen up to seven times. By the time restitution was made, the thief may have lost everything (Prov. 6:30, 31).

The punishment for an adulterer was far more severe. Though it was often ignored, especially for male offenders, the punishment outlined in Deuteronomy 22:22 was death by stoning. At the very least, the adulterer would suffer public disgrace. He would have to fear the woman's husband for the rest of his life—he would never know when the husband's brooding jealousy might turn into a desire for deadly revenge. Unlike a thief who could compensate society and the victim by making restitution, the adulterer could offer no amount of money that would satisfy the violated husband's rage (Prov. 6:32-35).

Even a man as powerful as King David experienced horrible consequences of adultery when he broke the seventh commandment. Perhaps to escape possible revenge by Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, David ordered the loyal soldier killed. Despite David's attempt to escape justice, however, God stepped in and punished him for his sin. As a result of God's judgment upon David, the nation of Israel suffered, Solomon's older brother died, and the sword never left David's family.

Ask Yourself . . . *What was the most serious consequence of my own sin I've had to experience?*

Perhaps when Solomon was a young boy he heard whispers around the court about his father and mother's sinful beginnings.

By the time Solomon was born, the knowledge of David's sin was public information. Maybe even as a young man Solomon mistakenly felt he shared in their guilt. It is reasonably certain that some members of the royal court would have viewed Solomon as an illegitimate heir to the throne since he was the son of an exposed adulteress. Considering Solomon's family history, it is not surprising that he would warn his student so strongly against entering into a romantic relationship with someone else's spouse. He, more than any other, would have been able to appreciate the long-term repercussions of such an act.

Proverbs 7 in Brief

In chapter 7, Solomon continued his warnings about adultery. The king wrote a short drama to graphically prepare his student for the seduction he might encounter. In this drama, Solomon played the role of an observer who watched an evil, adulterous woman lead a naive young man to his destruction.

Solomon compared the young man to an ox unknowingly going to slaughter and a deer foolishly stepping into a trap. The price for his folly would be his life. Solomon closed the drama by explaining that the only protection from such a strong temptation was to embrace wisdom. Without wisdom, any person could fall into the same snare.

4

Lady Wisdom

Proverbs 8—9

a Wisdom's Message (8:1-11)

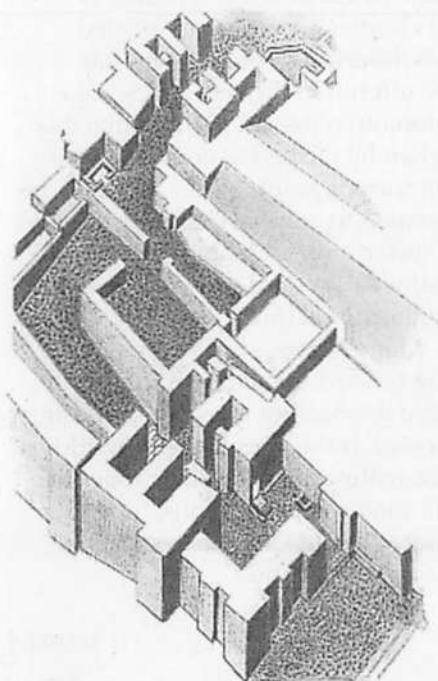
You who are simple, gain
prudence;
you who are foolish,
set your hearts on it.
—Proverbs 8:5

The sages of ancient nations often personified wisdom as Solomon did in Proverbs 8 and 9. By personifying

the concept of understanding and discernment, Solomon made wisdom more than a system of information and principles. By referring to wisdom as a person, Solomon transformed wisdom from an "it" into a "she." As a living being, "Wisdom" became a proper noun and was able to interact with the world around her. In this passage, Wisdom gave the reader a concise autobiographical sketch.

As a "person" Wisdom was able to rebuke the foolish, praise the wise, and display a wide range of emotions. She stood by God at the creation of the universe and resisted her personified nemesis "Folly." As a living being, she was able to go

Wisdom called out from the gates of the city where people from all walks of life could hear her (Prov. 8:3). This is an artist's representation of the Gate of Dan. The gates of ancient cities were usually more than just doors in a wall; they were often a complex of chambers. While designed to provide protection from enemies, city gates would often serve in peacetime as marketplaces and as meeting rooms for the city's leaders.



to those who needed her and reach them with a timely message of righteousness and prudence. She did not have to stand idly by and wait for them to seek her out. She had no problem calling attention to herself (vs. 1).

Solomon portrayed Wisdom as a fiery, determined preacher who represented everything that was good about God. She could be found at every intersection and on every hilltop. She was present at the gates of every small town and large city where the leadership met to hold court. Anywhere society might gather, she was present to proclaim the truth and seek justice. No one was beyond the hearing of her voice. Wisdom was no respecter of persons; she showed no partiality toward any race or social class. She raised her voice to all of humanity (vss. 2-4).

Wisdom's passion was to train and correct the immature, the inexperienced, and the naive. These foolish ones were not necessarily people with evil intentions. Instead, they are often young people who blindly follow selfish and immoral leadership. Many times they would not consider the natural consequences of their actions. Wisdom came to these simpletons and offered to teach them knowledge and improved judgment. She gave them the opportunity to change their foolish ways before they were beyond her reach (vs. 5).

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time I chose wisdom over foolishness?*

Unlike her adversary Folly, who attempted to mislead young people with deceptive words and half-truths, Wisdom relied on clarity and honesty. Her words were all truthful and good; the wise could recognize them as such. Wisdom is a noble lady with a practical and beneficial message to preach (8:6-9; compare 9:13-18).

The opposite was true as well. Those who refused to follow her would not be able to understand what she was trying to communicate—they probably wouldn't care anyway. Their rebellious attitudes would blind them to Wisdom's simple truths. Of course, they were also blind to Wisdom's benefits and rewards.

Solomon closed this section by reminding his student that though pursuing wisdom could lead to material wealth, its intrinsic value far exceeded riches. In verse 11 of chapter 8, Solomon repeated his description of wisdom that he offered in Proverbs 3:15. Solomon often used repetition like this when he wished to emphasize an important point. In this instance, he wanted to emphasize that wisdom was far more valuable than material wealth—and could be obtained without cost (8:10).

Many persons today are willing to work second jobs in order to give themselves greater purchasing power. If the people of the world are willing to make such a sacrifice for material possessions, how much more should Christians strive to acquire wisdom?



Wisdom's Rewards (8:12-21)

**I love those who love me,
and those who seek me find me.
With me are riches and honor,
enduring wealth and prosperity.
—Proverbs 8:17, 18**

Through the personified voice of Wisdom, Solomon introduced her sister Prudence. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines prudence as "the ability to govern and discipline oneself with the use of reason" and "skill and good judg-

ment in the use of resources." In this passage, Wisdom and Prudence are treated as equals. In a sense, prudence is wisdom in action (vs. 12).

The Hebrew term for prudence is occasionally used in the Old Testament to describe a wicked person's clever ways. In these passages, the term is usually translated "craftiness." The word is used to describe the shrewdness of the snake in the Garden of Eden and the destructive plans of the conspirator (see Gen. 3:1; Ps. 83:3). Of course, Solomon was presenting the godly side of prudence. In Proverbs, the term conveys the idea of practicing good

The Wisdom of Unbelieving Kings

Solomon taught that God is the source of all wisdom, and that wisdom was the source of all power and authority—especially for kings. In many kingdoms in the ancient Middle East, kingship was believed to have been established by their pagan gods. The king was viewed as representing and often embodying the authority of the local deity. Therefore, the local inhabitants believed that a king ruled by divine right. That is why Hammurabi, king of ancient Babylon, felt free to boast that he was "the sun of Babylon." He ruled as representative of the local god Marduk.

Kings were also believed to have direct access to divine wisdom. Therefore, Hammurabi claimed that he had "plumbed the depth of wisdom." That belief gave Hammurabi the authority he needed to develop his famous set of laws called the Hammurabi Code.

judgment and making decisions that honor God. For example, Solomon displayed prudent behavior when he saw through Adonijah's scheme to steal the throne of Israel from him (see 1 Kings 2:22, 23).

Ask Yourself . . . *Has prudence ever kept me out of trouble?*

Wisdom passionately hates the ways evil manifests itself through human beings—namely, through pride, evil actions, and unwholesome speech. Fearing God will also naturally result in a righteous hatred toward these things. Solomon's conclusion seems to be that a person cannot claim to know God and at the same time justify any expression of evil (Prov. 8:13).

Wisdom continued her personal sketch by describing some of her more important qualities and abilities. She was an excellent counselor, with sound judgment and understanding. In a sense, Wisdom is a good listener. If we bring our problems to her, she is able to compassionately help us find solutions to those problems. In addition to these skills, she was also endowed with great power. By her power, she set up and maintained the governments of the world. History is full of stories about kings and kingdoms who fell after abandoning wisdom. Kings and princes owed their authority to her—even though some refused to acknowledge it. She inspired just laws to protect the people; laws that do not embrace wisdom prove to be either burdensome or unenforceable (vss. 14-16).

Wisdom ended this portion of her personal sketch with a promise of reward. Those who loved her would receive her love in return. Those who sought her out would find her. They would be rewarded by her with great riches and honor. Even so, the wealth and accolades would be of little value when compared to the intimacy they would enjoy with Wisdom (vss. 17-21).

The Bible is never shy when talking about the rewards of following God. A person who had carefully read the Bible would never be able to say, "I wasn't aware of the benefits of obedience." The person who obtains biblical wisdom will seldom suffer from a lack of purpose or sense of significance in life.

C Wisdom in Creation (8:22-31)

**I was constantly at [the LORD's]
side.**

**I was filled with delight day after
day,**

**rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.**

—Proverbs 8:30, 31

Wisdom continued this portion of her personal sketch by flashing back to some of her earliest memories. According to Wisdom, she was with God before He created the heavens and the earth. Solomon

placed these claims in Wisdom's mouth so she could claim the rights and responsibilities of the firstborn. As firstborn, Wisdom possessed authority over all the things that were created. Also as the firstborn, Wisdom served as the family representative between God and those who followed her. Therefore, no person should act without first consulting her (vss. 22, 23).

Ask Yourself . . . *What is my most striking memory of a time when I acted unwisely?*

The phrase "brought me forth" (vs. 22) has caused a great deal of discussion among Bible scholars. Was Solomon saying that wisdom was the first thing God created, or did he merely mean that God possessed wisdom as He created? The verb in verse 22 is used 12 times in Proverbs and each time conveys the idea of acquiring or possessing. It is unlikely that Solomon meant to convey that wisdom was a created entity.

To emphasize the importance of Wisdom's firstborn status, Solomon had her echo the Creation story from Genesis 1. Wisdom was with God before He created the oceans and sources of freshwater. She existed before God created the mountains or any other landmass. She was at His side when He marked out the sky above the horizon (Prov. 8:24-29).

Wisdom was more than an idle spectator while God created the heavens and the earth. She was an active participant. Solomon described her as "constantly" work-

A Heretical Use of **Wisdom**

Because of the references to Wisdom being the firstborn of creation and the craftsman at God's side during Creation, some Bible scholars believe that Proverbs 8 is a description of the Christ prior to the Incarnation—even though Wisdom is personified here as a woman.

In Christian history the heretical movement called Arianism picked up on this idea and attempted to use passages such as Proverbs 8:22-31 to prove that Jesus was a created being. They claimed that Jesus could not be coeternal with the Father if in fact He was a created being—as described in Proverbs 8.

Even if Wisdom, as described in Proverbs 8, is a representation of Christ, one need not conclude that either Wisdom or Christ had a beginning. For example, Colossians 1:15 describes Christ as the firstborn of all creation. This does not mean that Jesus was the first created entity, but rather that He holds preeminence over all creation.

ing at God's side (vs. 30).

The term translated as "constantly" was the same term used to describe Bezalel, who designed and organized the building of the tabernacle (see Exod. 31:1-3). Just as Bezalel used his exceptional abilities faithfully as he worked under the leadership of Moses, so Wisdom used her exceptional abilities faithfully as she assisted God in His Creation.

She did not recall her work for God as being a tedious process. Instead, she remembered every moment of her work as a joyful experience. The reason for her joy was not merely pride in her accomplishments. Her happiness was the natural result of her closeness to the presence of the Lord. The delight she felt being in His presence carried over to the world that her hands

Ancient Wisdom Parallels

Books composed of proverbs were common in the ancient Middle East. The use of such literature has been traced back, in written form, to the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians around 2700 B.C. Numerous verses from the Book of Proverbs are similar to the proverbs of Amenemope, an Egyptian who lived during the time of Solomon. Below is an example of a similar proverb for comparison.

*Do not lean on the
scales, nor falsify
the weights, nor
damage the fractions
of the measure.
(Amenemope
of Egypt)*

*Differing weights
and differing
measures—the LORD
detests them both.
(Solomon—
Proverbs 20:10)*

Despite their similarity, there is one glaring difference. Amenemope made no reference to God. To the wise men of Israel, true wisdom came only from God. Appropriating wisdom was impossible apart from a healthy fear of God. This is what separated Jewish wisdom literature from all its ancient counterparts.

created. Her love for God's creation, especially human beings, was boundless (Prov. 8:31).

When we ask God for wisdom, we are asking for something that has been around since the foundation of the world. We can trust God's wisdom because of its vast experience and depth of insight. Certainly there is nothing we can face that God's wisdom hasn't seen thousands of times in the lives of others.



Hearing Wisdom's Call (8:32-36)

**Blessed are those who listen to me,
watching daily at my doors,
waiting at my doorway.**

—Proverbs 8:34

With her personal sketch complete, Wisdom closed her discourse by inviting young people to listen and learn from the message she preached at every intersection and gathering place. She wanted them to know that it was not too late to respond to her call. Her persistence in attempting to reach the foolish was a strong sign of her love for those who were created in the image of God. Her persistence is an example of God's tenacious attempts to reach people today. If the student would respond, he would experience Wisdom's blessings. If he chose to ignore her, he would become increasingly steeped in his foolishness (vss. 32, 33).

Not willing to give up, Wisdom

again invited the young man to follow her and reminded him of the benefits that would come if he obeyed. As in Wisdom's earlier invitations, she used the term "listen." This word carried with it the idea of hearing with a desire to obey and a readiness to act. Her invitation to the young man to meet her at her home is a stark contrast to the invitation of the adulteress. Unlike the adulteress, who seeks him in the darkness, Wisdom searches for him in the light of day (vs. 34; compare 7:9, 10).

Another contrast between the adulteress and Wisdom is seen in the consequences the young man would receive for his visit. The adulterous woman would curse the young man with death. Wisdom would bless the young man with favors from the Lord and a full and abundant life. The wise man who sought her would be blessed with wealth, honor, and a purposeful existence (8:35).

Wisdom closed this passage with a warning about ignoring her. Those who chose not to follow her were in reality just hurting themselves. Wisdom would not actively punish those who refused to follow her. She simply would not be there to protect them from the consequences they brought upon themselves (vs. 36).

Why do some people deafen their ears to the call of wisdom? Perhaps her path is perceived as too rugged or steep. The path of folly, however, seems to offer a smooth ride. Sometimes taking the path of wisdom can be painful, but in the end it is

always worth it. We would do well to heed the words of Jesus, "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" (Matt. 7:13, 14).

Proverbs 9 in Brief

Solomon presented two lifestyles for people to choose. One was the way of wisdom or righteousness. The other was the path of folly or wickedness. The king contrasted these two opposing lifestyles by personifying both as women.

Solomon described Wisdom as being talented and industrious. She

built her own spacious house and prepared great meals on her own. In contrast, Solomon pictured Folly without any positive talents or motivation to grow. Folly could not build her own house or take care of herself. While Wisdom was busy working, Folly was idly sitting by.

The only similarities between the two women were their locations and desired audience. Both called out from the highest point of the city, which symbolized that both lifestyles were available to anyone at anytime. Both women also targeted the simple, immature, and naive. People with these characteristics were not limited to any specific age or gender. Wisdom and Folly made themselves available to anyone.

5

The Proverbs of Solomon

Proverbs 10—11

a The Ways of the Righteous (10:1-7)

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

The name of the righteous is used
in blessings,
but the name of the wicked will
rot.

—Proverbs 10:6, 7

Chapter 10 begins the first collection of proverbs directly attributed to Solomon. This collection extends through Proverbs 22:16. (The second collection is found in chapters 25—27; these were brought together by Hezekiah's scribes.) The proverbs in this first collection are distinct from those that preceded them. In this collection, there are no extended metaphors, long poems, or admonitions to pursue wisdom and avoid folly. Instead, these wise sayings fit the typical model of a proverb—they are short and pithy and make extensive use of parallelism. These proverbs cover broad topics such as education, social behavior, and devotion to God.

Most of the two-line units in this section are independent of one another. A proverb about friendship may stand alongside a proverb about hard work. Though occasionally two or more successive proverbs do deal with the same topic, these tend to be the exception and not the rule.

Scholars disagree as to whether there was a purposeful design in the arrangement of these individual proverbs. The arrangement of the proverbs may have been influenced by such considerations as repetition, rhyme, or some other ancient literary devices that are difficult to appreciate due to translation.

Since Solomon is attributed with writing 3,000 proverbs (see I Kings 4:32), these 375 proverbs were probably selected from a larger body of Solomon's writings. Why these specific proverbs were chosen over the king's other proverbs, however, is unknown. Perhaps they were considered a representative sample.

In the first proverb of this section, Solomon reminded the reader that no person is an island, especially when it comes to his or her family of origin. All of a person's actions will have some sort of impact on

Parallel Thoughts

A majority of the proverbs in Solomon's first collection were written using a literary device called "*parallelism*." Parallelism is a technique in which two lines are related to one another in some way.

1. Sometimes the relationship is contrasting. In other words, the second line of the proverb confirms the truth of the first line by stating the opposite truth. For example, "Ill-gotten treasures have no lasting value,/but righteousness delivers from death" (Prov. 10:2).

2. At other times the second line repeats the truth taught by the first line, but in a slightly different way. This may be called *repeating parallelism*. For example, "Whoever winks maliciously causes grief,/and a chattering fool comes to ruin" (vs. 10).

3. A looser form of this literary device is called *adding parallelism*, in which the author's idea is simply extended to the second line. For example, "Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress,/and for their children it will be a refuge" (14:26).

4. Another form of parallelism is the comparison in which the author compares value judgments. For example, "If the righteous receive their due on earth,/how much more the ungodly and the sinner!" (11:31).

5. A final type of parallelism takes the form of statement and explanation. For example, "A king's wrath strikes terror like the roar of a lion;/those who anger him forfeit their lives" (20:2).

These types of literary devices were common teaching tools during Solomon's time. Some scholars have speculated that these devices were used to make memorizing teachings easier.

his or her family, especially the parents. Wisdom will bring them joy; foolishness will bring them grief (Prov. 10:1). Growing up, Solomon may have seen the joy in David's face when he acted wisely—and he certainly witnessed his father's grief when Absalom attempted to usurp the throne.

This next proverb contrasts the rewards of the righteous with the punishment of the wicked. Though Solomon admitted that the wicked may acquire material wealth, he taught that their riches would be of no eternal value to them (vs. 2). Generally speaking, people who are willing to gain wealth at another person's expense are emotionally unable to enjoy what they have acquired. Usually individuals of such low character are so fixated on acquiring more wealth or protecting what they have that they find it difficult to derive any joy from what they already possess.

In contrast, an honest person is capable of enjoying even limited finances. Since this person believes that God will protect and provide, the righteous person is free to enjoy material and immaterial possessions. Being involved in healthy relationships with God and other people will grant the righteous person greater security and enjoyment in life than a wicked millionaire could ever claim (vs. 3).

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I able to enjoy what I have, or am I preoccupied with acquiring more?*

Even though the king taught that God would provide for and protect His people, this did not mean that Solomon encouraged laziness. On the contrary, the king taught the value of hard work. He pledged that perseverance would bring wealth to the worker and honor to the laborer's family. A lazy son would only bring poverty upon himself (vss. 4, 5).

One of God's greatest provisions is the ability to work. We bring dishonor to Him when we fail to do our part to provide materially for ourselves and our families. That is why the apostle Paul rebuked those persons who refused to work in the church at Thessalonica (see II Thess. 3:6-15). Solomon would have applauded Paul's approach to lazy people who had the ability to work but refused.

Solomon closed this section by contrasting the long-term results of a righteous life with those of a wicked life. The righteous would receive the same honors from their neighbors as persons of royalty. They would be loved and respected as role models by those around them. Even after their physical deaths, Solomon claimed, they would be remembered fondly and would continue to have a positive influence on the world. In contrast, the names of the wicked would be quickly forgotten after their deaths, which would probably be violent (Prov. 10:6, 7).

Ask Yourself . . . *How would I like to be remembered?*

b A Sign of Integrity (10:8-16)

Whoever walks in integrity walks
securely,
but whoever takes crooked
paths will be found out.
—Proverbs 10:9

Solomon continued his wise sayings by sharing proverbs about obedience, integrity, wise speech, forgiveness, and the magnificent blessings of God's provision.

Those who are wise demonstrate their God-given wisdom by showing appropriate obedience to those whom God has placed over them.

A stone covered spring in Israel.

In contrast, those with stubborn and rebellious spirits who argue with and disobey their superiors eventually come to ruin (vs. 8).

A person of integrity never has

A Fountain of Life

Solomon described the words of the righteous as "a fountain of life" (Prov. 10:11). In Bible times, fountains were springs of water that flowed from a hole in the earth. The limestone in Israel is well suited for the formation of such fountains.

People tended to settle around these prized sources of water. This explains the frequent Hebrew prefix of *En*, which means "spring,"

in the names of many towns (for example, Endor, En Gedi, and En Hazor). Moses described Canaan as "a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills" (Deut. 8:7).

Springwater is often referred to in Scripture as an expression of God's provision.



to worry about being caught in a lie. Perpetuating a lie takes a lot of thought and energy because the liar has to keep remembering what he or she claimed to be true. Eventually, the perjurer trips up in his or her story and is exposed as a liar. In contrast, the honest person doesn't have to keep making up the truth (vs. 9).

Solomon wrote a great deal about communicating with others in ways that build up goodwill. When Solomon warned his readers to beware of someone who "winks maliciously" (vs. 10), he was describing persons who attempted to stir up trouble through the sly use of nods, hints, and innuendos. Often after starting the trouble, they would step into the shadows and allow a "chattering fool" to proliferate the dissension and distrust they began. Words of wisdom bring life and health to relationships; careless words only tear down relationships and can lead to violence (vs. 11).

Ask Yourself . . . *How would those closest to me characterize my words last week?*

Once strife enters into a relationship, there are usually only two directions that relationship can go. If the pattern of fear, distrust, and bitterness is perpetuated, then isolation will likely result. If forgiveness and understanding are pursued, then reconciliation is likely to be the result. The first path leads to even greater dissension and suffering. The second promotes healing and growth in the relationship (vs. 12).

Both Peter and James quoted this proverb to demonstrate the comprehensive ability of love to absorb the damage of sin, without ignoring the seriousness of wrongdoing (see Jas. 5:20; 1 Pet. 4:8).

A vital part of healing and maintaining healthy relationships is the wise use of the tongue. Our words carry a great deal of power. Solomon believed that a person's wisdom could be measured by the way he or she spoke. He was especially impressed by the person who spent more time listening and thinking than speaking. Those who tended to run off at the mouth, however, would suffer for their folly (Prov. 10:13, 14).

While some of Solomon's proverbs were intended to warn, others are just observations about how life often works. Verse 15 is such a proverb. Solomon acknowledged that it is easier to make money if you already have money. He also admitted that there is a type of security that can be gained from material wealth. Wealthy persons today can often afford better legal and medical aid than the economically challenged. Most rich people do not have to be concerned about their next meal. The poor could not claim such benefits.

How a person obtains his or her wealth matters a great deal to God. The wealth of the righteous brings them health and peace. Those who obtain money by deceptive means eventually have to face the consequences of their greed (vs. 16).



The Value of Wholesome Words (10:17-25)

**Sin is not ended by multiplying words,
but the prudent hold their tongues.**

—Proverbs 10:19

Solomon strongly encouraged his readers to be honest about their failings and accept correction from others. Only then could a person have the ability to grow. Solomon realized that only the individual who could be honest about his or her mistakes could learn from them. Any other attitude makes people unteachable (vs. 17).

The need for honest self-evaluation carried over to a person's speech as well. To feel bitter about something and pretend that everything is fine is hypocritical (vs. 18). Biblical history is full of examples of stuffed hatred. Cain concealed his feelings about his brother Abel and then killed him (see Gen. 4:8). Saul plotted against David while claiming to be his friend (see I Sam. 18:21-29). Absalom invited Amnon to a party just to assassinate him (see II Sam. 13:28). Solomon wanted his readers to guard their hearts against all kinds of unresolved bitterness.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I harboring any grudges?

Solomon encouraged his readers to be slow to speak (Prov. 10:19).

The more words that are spoken, the more likely sin will show up. A few words spoken in wisdom are of infinitely greater value than the ramblings of fools. Words from wise people have a nourishing and nurturing quality to them. Fools, on the other hand, tend to poison themselves and others with their own babbling (vss. 20, 21).

Wealth that is obtained by honorable means has no baggage with it. The one who has it does not have to fear the police, creditors, or departments of revenue. God enables the godly person to enjoy his or her resources. In contrast, the wicked fool who finds cruelty pleasant and useful will one day receive the punishment he or she so desperately fears. The fool's wealth, life, and even his or her memory will be wiped away. Only the righteous will be allowed to enjoy the blessings God has planned for them (vss. 22-25).



The Hope of the Righteous (10:26-32)

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

—Proverbs 10:28

Solomon's graphic proverb about swallowed vinegar has many similarities with Ezekiel's metaphor about sour grapes. "The parents

A Bitter Drink

Solomon compared a hired sluggard to vinegar mouthwash (Prov. 10:26).

In the Old Testament, vinegar was made by allowing wine to deteriorate. The resulting bitter drink was used for the flavoring and preservation of food.

The reference to vinegar in Psalm 69:21 not only attests to this liquid's bitterness, but also seems to imply that the consumption of fully concentrated vinegar was used as a punishment or act of revenge. On the other hand, greatly diluted vinegar was sometimes used as a drink in Bible times.

eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek. 18:2). In both cases, the actions of another caused someone's teeth to be set on edge. According to Solomon, such is the fate of the one who sends a lazy person with a message. Anyone who gives such an assignment to a sluggard will eventually come to regret it. Better to swallow a cup of vinegar or to be downwind of a pile of burning tires. Solomon used this proverb

to teach his readers to choose their friends and business partners wisely (Prov. 10:26).

Solomon reminded his readers again of the long-term prospects of the righteous versus those of the wicked. The righteous person who fears the Lord will have a long life. The wicked will probably die without warning. The righteous will experience success and happiness. The wicked will be frustrated and unable to achieve their goals. The righteous can turn to God in their time of need. The wicked will always live in fear of the Lord's judgment (vss. 27-29).

The righteous and their offspring would remain in the land of Israel while the wicked would be exiled (vs. 30). The importance of this claim by Solomon may be difficult to appreciate in our transient culture. The people of Israel viewed the land they lived in as a part of themselves. Abraham left everything behind to lay claim to it. Moses led the Hebrews through 40 years of wandering just so they could be near it. Joshua and other leaders led the nation in fighting countless enemies so they could possess it. A large portion of every Israelite's identity was tied to this promised land. To be removed from it would be like having a limb amputated.

Ask Yourself . . . *What is my dearest possession?*

Solomon taught that a person's words reflect what is in that person's heart. Righteous people speak wisdom; the words of the wicked are

usually perverse and often inappropriate (vss. 31, 32). These proverbs mirror Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:45, "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."

Proverbs 11 in Brief

Most of the proverbs in this chapter are excellent examples of contrasting parallelism. Solomon used this technique to contrast honest and dishonest business practices. He also contrasted the results of pride and humility. The former led to disgrace; the latter led to wisdom. Next, he contrasted persons of integrity with the unfaithful. Even if the unfaithful persons prospered, their wealth could not protect them from death.

Solomon also repeated his warnings against gossip and accepting financial responsibility for another by using contrasting parallelism. He contrasted the kindhearted woman who gained respect with the ruthless

person who could only gain money.

One of his most graphic analogies in the chapter was his comparison of a beautiful woman who had no discretion with a pig having a gold ring in its snout. The gold ring was not unusual in itself. Israelite women might have worn gold rings in their noses as ornaments. The harsh part of the comparison was the pig. Pigs were considered unclean in Israelite society. Therefore, Solomon was claiming that no matter how well she appeared, such a woman was unclean on the inside.

Solomon also contrasted the relationship of society toward the righteous and the wicked. Generally, he believed that society prospered along with the righteous but suffered under the influence of the wicked. To protect society from the influence of the wicked, Solomon saw a need to seek wisdom from a variety of sources. He realized that even the wisest of people were still limited to only one point of view. Therefore, he sought out a variety of opinions and attitudes to keep himself from becoming intellectually lazy about his decisions.



The Value of Discipline

Proverbs 12—13

a Favor from God (12:1-8)

Good people obtain favor from the
LORD,

but he condemns those who
devise wicked schemes.

No one can be established through
wickedness,

but the righteous cannot be
uprooted.

—Proverbs 12:2, 3

The collection of Solomon's 375 proverbs, which began being covered in lesson 5, continues through this lesson.

Solomon began his remarks in this passage by challenging his readers to love discipline. A love for discipline reflects a desire to understand what is good. The person who is repulsed by correction, however, demonstrates his or her ignorance and the lack of any desire to grow. The word translated "stupid" here implies that the person who spurns discipline has the reasoning faculties of a dumb animal (vs. 1).

The person who works hard to attain wisdom and live righteously will be blessed by God. In contrast,

those who practice craftiness in their dealings with others will be thwarted by God. The word used to describe "those who devise wicked schemes" (vs. 2) is often used in Proverbs 1—9, but in those chapters it is usually rendered "prudent" because the context illustrates a positive characteristic. Here, however, Solomon was describing a person who is wickedly shrewd and uses his or her intelligence to gain an advantage over others.

Solomon acknowledged that the wicked may prosper in the short-term. But only the righteous will be blessed with staying power by God. In his youth, Solomon saw his half brother Absalom use trickery to claim the throne for a short while. Their father, David, however, eventually regained control of the throne. Perhaps it was this experience that reinforced in Solomon's mind that God will not forsake the righteous (12:3).

Ask Yourself . . . *How deep are my spiritual roots?*

Solomon praised the wife of noble character, but rebuked the woman who constantly shamed her husband. It is not surprising that

Solomon would view a good wife, instead of wealth and power, as a husband's crown. Such a woman brings a multitude of blessings to her husband. In contrast, marriage to a disgraceful wife is like a bone cancer that slowly drains a man's enthusiasm for life (vs. 4).

Solomon repeatedly shared proverbs about character and the kinds of fruit that different types of people bear. Those with a history of telling the truth are usually respected and trusted by their neighbors. The plans they make take the best interests of others into account, not just their own. In contrast, people who have a history of lying can be counted on to give bad advice. The motives behind their counsel are usually self-serving. People who follow God survive and even thrive in the midst of adversity. But wicked characters—those who plan on harming and stealing from others will eventually be overthrown by their own plans (vss. 5-7).

Ask Yourself . . . *How would my closest friend rate my trustworthiness?*

People who have been gifted by God with wisdom tend to have good reputations among their neighbors. Deceptive people not only suffer at the hand of God, but they are despised by others as well. Their warped thinking prevents them from maintaining happy and healthy relationships (vs. 8).

These proverbs speak freely about the stabilizing power of following God. Though some people may use deceptive means to gain wealth and

The Crown of a Noble Wife

Solomon used the metaphor of a crown to describe the honoring effect of a noble wife upon her husband (Prov. 12:4).

Four kinds of crowns are described in the Old Testament. The first type was worn by the high priest and Israel's kings, and was usually made of a light gold plate engraved with words of consecration. A second type of crown was worn in battle by Hebrew kings. Usually this was a band of silk studded with a few jewels. A third type of crown was massive, usually made of silver and gold and decorated with many jewels.

The last type of crown was a wreath of laurels or flowers, and usually was worn at banquets and festivals. This type of crown was typically used to show special honor to a person who wore it. (You can find a depiction of this type of crown on page 10.) Solomon may have had this type of crown in mind when he used it as a metaphor to illustrate the honor a noble wife brings her husband.

power for themselves, they have no roots to hold them in place when adversity comes. The righteous, on the other hand, can count on God to preserve them, no matter what circumstances might come their way.

b Common Sense (12:9-16)

Those who work their land will
have abundant food,
but those who chase fantasies
have no sense.
The wicked desire the stronghold
of evildoers,
but the root of the righteous
endures.

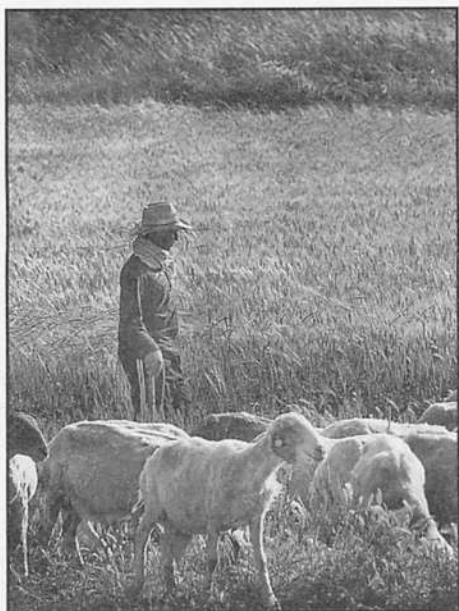
—Proverbs 12:11, 12

Throughout human history common sense has been an uncommon commodity. The king's warning against attempting to dazzle others at the expense of common sense is as valid for us today as it was in Solomon's time. Despite the king's royal heritage, he was not impressed by a person's wealth or status but by how he or she demonstrated wisdom.

Solomon stated that it is better to have little status and be able to live within your means than to perpetuate a facade of success when you can't even pay your bills (vs. 9). During Bible times even people of moderate means, such as Gideon's family, could afford to have servants (see Judg. 6:15, 27). Having servants

did not place someone high up on the social ladder. However, if a family spent too much on expensive clothes and trinkets to impress their neighbors, they would end up with empty stomachs underneath their expensive apparel. These days, easy access to credit has caused many a person to fall into the same trap.

Ask Yourself . . . *How accurately does the image I portray to others reflect my actual financial status?*



Solomon said that the righteous person takes care of his or her animals, but the wicked person is cruel to them (Prov. 12:10). This is a shepherd in Israel tending his sheep and goats. The shepherd's staff can be used as a gentle guide or as a weapon to beat animals into submission.

Solomon said righteous people can demonstrate their godliness by the way they take care of their animals. Centuries before the founding of the Humane Society, the Bible condemned cruelty to animals (see Num. 22:32; Deut. 25:4). Solomon condemned such actions as well. He would not consider a person as either wise or righteous who treated animals harshly. Harming the livestock that one depended on for survival showed a lack of common sense on the part of the tormentor (Prov. 12:10).

Today, the way people take care of their pets is often a reflection of the tenderness or hardness of their own hearts.

Another example of a person lacking common sense is the person who sets aside productive work to chase after quick and easy money (vs. 11). In Solomon's time, a person's survival was closely tied to the land he or she farmed. Though farming was hard work, it was the surest way for a person to meet his or her basic needs. To give up working the land and pursue some unproven money-making scheme was similar, in today's terms, to quitting a job and betting all your savings on a handful of lottery tickets.

The only people profiting from "get rich quick" schemes are those who peddle them. Even believers can find themselves getting taken in by promises of financial independence. When the security we gain from money replaces our dependence upon God, then our quest for wealth has become idolatry.

Solomon knew that wealth cannot easily be acquired by chasing fantasies. He also knew that using violence to acquire wealth is just as foolish. In the end the righteous will prosper, but those who gain by stealing are destined to failure. Likewise, the evil person who attempts to acquire wealth through deception will fall into a similar trap. Only the righteous who honestly work for what they have will be free to enjoy wealth's rewards (vss. 12-14).

Ask Yourself . . . Which of God's gifts do I enjoy the most?

As Solomon continued his commonsense approach to success, he gave his readers two important pieces of advice. The first is to seek counsel from persons with more experience and wisdom than you already have. The arrogant person who believes he or she knows all the answers will eventually meet with failure. The fool who thinks he or she knows best will sense no need to seek out a second opinion.

The second piece of advice is to respond thoughtfully, not react carelessly, to provocation. If the reader can practice self-control instead of seeking revenge when insulted, he or she will have the necessary tools to succeed in most circumstance—even in the face of stiff opposition (vss. 15, 16).

These proverbs can be boiled down to a few principles: live within your means, shun the facades of success, seek the advice of people you trust, and guard what you say—especially when provoked.

C Truthful Words (12:17-28)

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

Deceit is in the hearts of
those who plot evil,
but those who promote peace
have joy.

—Proverbs 12:19, 20

Solomon realized that there were some things more powerful than himself. One of those things was the human tongue. Solomon knew that the tongue had the power to bring down kingdoms. Over 100 verses in the Book of Proverbs give warnings about controlling the tongue and being wary of persons who do not.

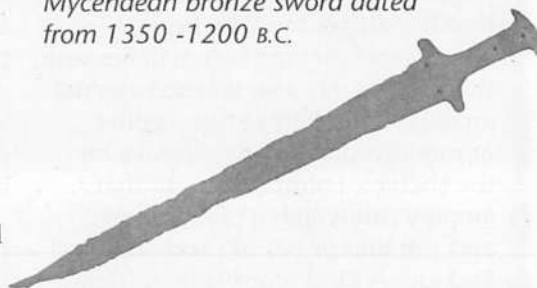
The misuse of the tongue often occurred in the court of law of Israel (vs. 17). As king, Solomon often served as presiding judge over some of the more difficult court cases of Israel. His position allowed him to observe firsthand the willful disregard of God's command against being a false witness (see Exod. 20:16). A memorable example of this occurred when two prostitutes claimed the same baby as their own (see I Kings 3:23). In this instance, the false witness was willing to see a baby killed if she wasn't going to win her case anyway.

Foolish people often use their tongues as weapons. With a word or two, they can injure a person's feelings and even his or her

reputation. Sometimes the harm they cause is accidental. But this does not diminish the damage. In contrast, the wise use the same body part to heal their neighbor's hurts. Solomon believed that though lies might cause temporary pain, truth will gain the victory in the end (Prov. 12:18, 19).

Ask Yourself . . . *What were the most healing words ever spoken to me?*

Solomon said that reckless words can pierce like a sword. This is a Mycenaean bronze sword dated from 1350 -1200 B.C.



Solomon believed that the pain of being wronged can be lessened by the joy of seeking peace. Though the wounds others caused might still be present, the pain from the wounds can be numbed by the balm of a peaceful spirit. In the end God will protect and heal the righteous. However, the wicked will feel even greater pain than they have caused in this life (vss. 20, 21).

Solomon expanded the scope of God's command against perjury from the courtroom to the city streets. To lie willfully to or about a neighbor is to call down the

judgment of God upon oneself. In contrast, God is pleased when a person speaks the truth regardless of the personal cost. God is also pleased when a person chooses his or her words carefully before speaking. Solomon rebuked the fool who blurts out his or her opinion without first considering the consequences. The fool will certainly suffer for his or her folly and might hurt others in the process (vss. 22, 23).

After finishing his short set of proverbs about the tongue, Solomon returned to other topics. He reminded his readers about the rewards of hard work. He predicted that the diligent will be leaders in society and that the lazy will become their slaves. He also warned against anxiety. Long before the surplus of modern-day self-help books hit the shelves, Solomon taught that anxiety can weigh a person down and rob him or her of productivity and joy. A kind word from a friend, however, may be all it takes to pull that person out of his or her rut (vss. 24-26). You never know when a word of encouragement might be the very thing a person needs to reverse a downward trend in his or her life.

Ask Yourself . . . *Who could I give an encouraging word to this week?*

Solomon placed a great value on friendship. He sought friendship for wise advice and as a way to lift a burdened spirit. Due to the importance of friendship, it is not surprising that he taught his readers to choose friends wisely. He warned

against buddies who might lead a young person to unrighteous living. Instead, he wanted people to seek friends who would guide them toward the path of wisdom (vs. 26). If Solomon's son Rehoboam would have followed his father's counsel concerning friendship, the kingdom of Israel might have remained united (see I Kings 12).

Some people are so lazy they even refuse to properly prepare their food. In the example of the sluggard who refuses to cook his or her meat, this could prove physically dangerous (Prov. 12:27a). In our day, sometimes it's refreshing just to go out to a restaurant even though our refrigerators are full.

If this becomes a habit, however, we may find ourselves paying two or three times more for food than we need to.

In contrast to the lazy person who refuses to prepare meals, diligent folk prize the rewards of their hard work (vs. 27b). There's something about working hard for what you have that increases its value to you.

The world offers many ways to secure one's "immortality"—write a book, bear children, or perhaps get your name on a plaque. Only by knowing and obeying God, however, can one possess true immortality—something more than just being a memory in the mind of another. The immortality that results from following God's way is a dynamic, life-giving existence (vs. 28).



Authentic Wealth (13:1-9)

One person pretends to be rich, yet
has nothing;
another pretends to be poor, yet
has great wealth.
A person's riches may ransom his life,
but the poor cannot respond to
threatening rebukes.

—Proverbs 13:7, 8

The person who thinks he or she knows everything is incapable of learning. Solomon described this type of person as a mocker. In contrast, the person who is willing to be instructed by others is already on the path of wisdom. If a person's words are humble, then this person will only grow in wisdom. The proud fool, in contrast, will choke on his or her pride and impulsively react violently toward others. Again, people who watch what they say guard well what is important to them. Those who speak rashly eventually lose everything (vss. 1-3).

Solomon was a man of great ambition. He desired to be wise and God gave him more wisdom than any who preceded him. He desired to build the Lord's temple and he succeeded. He desired to turn Israel into a powerful, wealthy nation and that, too, was accomplished. By his own example, he demonstrated that the desires of the ambitious (those who don't lose their focus on God) are eventually satisfied. In contrast, the sluggard lacks ambition and usually accomplishes nothing (vs. 4).

Ask Yourself . . . *What are 10 things I'd like to accomplish before I die?*

The righteousness Solomon wanted his readers to know is not a lifeless way of living to be analyzed and studied. Instead, it is a passionate, two-way relationship with God. He wanted his readers to hate what is false, not simply have an intellectual knowledge of what is not true. A passion for righteousness will protect its owner in troublesome times. In contrast, the sin of the wicked will be the very thing that destroys them (vss. 5, 6).

Solomon was considered one of the wealthiest men in the world during his life. Probably no one was more qualified to talk about the benefits and dangers of riches. He knew that a person's wealth cannot be judged by outward appearances. Persons who are terribly in debt can appear wealthy to the casual observer. Likewise, very wealthy persons can hide their wealth from prying eyes and appear to be middle-class (vs. 7).

Solomon also understood that a person's material wealth can bring as much harm as good into their lives. The rich do not suffer less, they merely suffer differently than the poor. Though a rich man can afford to pay a ransom for his life, a poor man does not have to worry about being kidnapped (vs. 8).

Solomon knew that the rich and the poor have much in common. Both are born and both physically die. Both feel joy, compassion, fear, and pain. The real difference

between human beings, regardless of their economic status, rests in the brightness of their characters before a holy God. The righteous will shine brilliantly. The wicked will be cast away like a burned-out bulb (vs. 9).

Proverbs 13:10-25 in Brief

Solomon used the remainder of the proverbs in chapter 13 to cover subjects as diverse as humility, honesty, and child discipline. He wanted his readers to be open to advice from others. He also suggested that money earned by hard work will be appreciated more and will last longer than money gained by dishonest means. Other

blessings of wisdom include the respect of neighbors, accomplished goals, and a long life. The wicked will be unable to enjoy any of these blessings.

Despite the material blessing Solomon stated would come with wisdom, he acknowledged that not all desires will be fulfilled and that injustice can sometimes cause a poor man to go hungry. Though Solomon's proverbs are excellent guides to success, they should never be interpreted as guaranteed promises of success.

7

Contrasting Perspectives

Proverbs 14—15

a The Deception of Fools (14:1-9)

Stay away from a fool, for you will not find knowledge on their lips. The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.

—Proverbs 14:7, 8

Solomon's first collection of proverbs continues with several that accentuate the differences between the ways of the wise and the ways of fools.

The king began by contrasting the domestic tendencies of wise and foolish women. A wise woman strengthens her marriage and family, whereas a foolish woman seems to deliberately tear down the members of her household (vs. 1). The foolish woman does this by refusing to show respect to the people in her family. Like all foolish people, this type of person usually has a problem with control.

This proverb is similar to the description of Lady Wisdom building her house (see 9:1). The differences between the two passages are

the subjects. Instead of contrasting personified characters, the king contrasted two types of women.

The basis of all biblical wisdom is the fear of God. This fear is not a paralyzing apprehension that makes the Lord unapproachable. Instead, it is an attitude of awe and loving reverence for God. This type of attitude is made evident in an honest life.

The person who is dishonest obviously has no respect for God— or His warnings of judgment. The wise person who fears God has no reason to fear punishment. Wise speech and actions ensure spiritual safety. In contrast, the mouth of the fool is sure to lead him or her into painful circumstances (14:2, 3).

In order to be productive, one needs the proper tools. Solomon chose an analogy from local farm life to illustrate this truth. Granted, where there were no oxen, the stalls were clean. Not much work to do. To be productive, however, the farmer had to employ sometimes messy animals like oxen to prepare the soil for planting. Taking care of these animals took a lot of work. This extra effort demanded from the farmer was easily offset by the productivity the oxen brought to the

farm (vs. 4). A modern-day equivalent to this proverb might be "You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs."

Ask Yourself . . . *Is there something I need to obtain in order to be more productive? If so, what is it?*

Throughout the Book of Proverbs, Solomon continued to impress upon his readers the importance of honest communication. Truthfulness builds trust in our relationships. When people can believe what we say, they are more likely to contribute and cooperate on any joint ventures. Solomon encouraged his readers to obey the ninth commandment, which prohibited lying to or about another person (see Exod. 20:16). Dishonesty is often so bound up in the heart of a fool that his or her mouth tends to gush out lies (Prov. 14:5). In contrast to trusting friendships, relationships that are based on lies usually do not last long. If they do last, they are usually manipulative, abusive, or destructive.

The mocker has no true interest in learning and understanding. Most scoffers think they know more than anyone anyway. That's why mockers express so much contempt for others. They may seek out wisdom for the sake of appearing wise, but they never really grasp God's truth. The mocker is usually more concerned with appearances than the actual state of affairs.

Learning comes much less painfully, however, to those who demonstrate discernment. In contrast to the mocker, wise people know the

Strong as an **OX**

Solomon spoke of the necessity of oxen to the farmer (Prov. 14:4). In Bible times, oxen pulled wagons, drew plows, and dragged threshing sleds. The possession of an ox was almost the bare minimum for a farmer's existence. The possession of a large herd of oxen was a sign of wealth.

Solomon's esteem for these animals was so high that he may have included their images in the building of the temple. The king rested the molten sea upon the backs of 12 "bulls." The word used for bulls in this verse is the generic one for cattle, so they may have been oxen (1 Kings 7:25).

depth of their ignorance and constantly seek to shore up that which is weak within themselves (vs. 6).

Fools have little to offer, so wise people are better off avoiding them. There is no use trying to get wisdom from those who have spurned it (vs. 7).

To Solomon, wisdom served better as a mirror for self-evaluation than a window to analyze a neighbor. The king believed that a wise person should spend less time look-



to take a jab at someone who has hurt us or is somehow preventing us from doing what we want to do.

If we do the “unnatural” thing, however, and reach out to this person in good faith, we might uncover an underlying problem in our relationship and gain a loyal friend.

ing at a neighbor's faults and more time viewing his or her own. In contrast, fools deceive themselves concerning their own failures (vs. 8). Jesus taught a similar lesson when He warned people that they should remove the plank from their own eye instead of worrying about the speck of sawdust in their neighbor's eye (see Matt. 7:3-5).

Solomon took the practice of self-evaluation a step further in the following verse when he called upon his readers to make amends for their sins. Though confession to God and temple sacrifices may have been a part of this process, religious ritual did not make up the total picture. Offerings could not mend broken relationships with one's neighbors. Therefore, Solomon admonished his readers to make amends to all persons they had intentionally or unintentionally wronged. For the fool, the mere thought of taking such an action would seem ridiculous. Maintaining goodwill is a sign of weakness to the mocker (Prov. 14:9).

Sometimes we might be tempted

b The Fate of Fools (14:10-18)

The house of the wicked will be destroyed,
but the tent of the upright will flourish.

There is a way that appears to be right,
but in the end it leads to death.

—Proverbs 14:11, 12

As human beings we all long to be understood, especially when we are going through especially happy or sad times. However, only we can truly know the depth of our joy or grief. No matter how empathetic a friend might be, no one can truly grasp the feelings of another person (vs. 10).

Wisdom and foolishness naturally show themselves in the home. The wise can count upon domestic tranquillity, but the home of the fool is constantly filled with bitterness and

strife. Eventually the house of the wicked will collapse under the pressure. But the homes of the wise will flourish and grow. The term rendered "flourish" (vs. 11) is an energetic word in Hebrew that suggests a tree powerfully bursting into bud.

Solomon's famous proverb about the way that seems right is repeated verbatim in Proverbs 16:25. The term "right" (14:12) carries with it the idea of taking an apparent shortcut to success. The shortcuts Solomon had in mind might have included behaviors such as gambling, theft, murder, and deception. No matter the alternative chosen, Solomon warned his readers that paths to quick success are usually false trails that can lead to self-destruction. Those who go in this direction do so at great risk.

Though wealthy and powerful, Solomon's writings in Ecclesiastes display a sorrowful side to his personality. Perhaps Proverbs 14:13 hints at that side as well. The lack of context makes interpreting this proverb a difficult task. However, one of two meanings seems likely.

(1) Perhaps the laughter he spoke of here may be a false display of happiness intended to hide a person's sadness from those around him or her. Such deception would fail in the end and that person's grief would eventually be unveiled. Or (2) life is full of both joy and sorrow. Sometimes happiness and grief are present in our lives, in differing degrees, at the same time (vs. 13).

Despite the fact that the rain falls on the just as well as the unjust, Solomon still strongly believed that

Solomon's Sorrow

By any human standard, King Solomon had everything. He was one of the richest of all kings. He had the finest accommodations, food, horses, and chariots. He was served by a large, well-trained staff. He had taken the most beautiful women of the land to be a part of his harem. He was gifted with great wisdom and worldwide fame.

Yet later in life he drifted from God. Happiness eluded him. Proverbs 14:13 and the Book of Ecclesiastes hint at the sorrow the loss of fellowship with God caused him.

the wicked will suffer more than the righteous as a result of their choices. The faithless persons he mentioned are ones who willfully turn away from obedience to God. In contrast, persons who are faithful to the Lord will be rewarded for their wisdom (vs. 14).

Wisdom has a way of driving out gullibility. The simple person will believe anything if it is presented persuasively enough. The prudent person, however, weighs the evi-

dence and then acts upon his or her best judgment. Solomon was not admonishing people to be cynical, just discerning. He wanted people to question what they heard and carefully consider how they should respond (vs. 15).

Ask Yourself . . . *When was I the most gullible? What did I learn from that experience?*

Solomon also wanted his readers to think before they acted out of anger. The king taught that a wise person turns to God for justice when he or she feels wronged. In contrast, a fool ignores God's promise to repay and seeks vengeance for himself or herself. (Remember, fools do not think that they will ever face the consequences for their own actions—so why should they believe that God will hold anyone else accountable?) Whether the hot-tempered fool takes revenge in a reckless or a premeditated manner, the results tend to be the same. The fool ends up being hated by everyone. Even if the act of revenge is successfully carried out, the fool is surprised when his or her sense of injustice has only deepened. The wise person who trusts God for justice is free to go on with his or her life (vss. 16, 17).

The emotions behind revenge are so powerful that only the Lord can handle them well. Better to leave vengeance in the hands of God than to regret our actions later.

Fools tend to become more foolish, while the wise only get wiser. The word "crowned" (vs. 18) could

be rendered "encircled by" or "embraced by." Increased knowledge and understanding are the ongoing rewards of the prudent.



The Rewards of Kindness (14:19-27)

**It is a sin to despise one's neighbor,
but blessed is the one who is
kind to the needy.**

**Do not those who plot evil go
astray?**

**But those who plan what is good
find love and faithfulness.**

—Proverbs 14:21, 22

Eventually those who are wicked will serve the righteous. The term that is rendered "bow down" (vs. 19) was often used of a conquered people waiting for their orders. Solomon may have been thinking of Joseph's dream about his brothers bowing down before him (see Gen. 37:7). In Joseph's case, the dream became a reality. Though it took many years of suffering from injustice and false accusation, the evil brothers finally bowed down before their upright brother. Like Joseph, the righteous will be victorious over those who oppress them. This truth is reflected in the apostle Paul's prediction in Philippians 2:10, 11, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus

Solomon said that a person who fears the Lord lives in a secure fortress (Prov. 14:26). These are the remains of a fortress at Arbel, Israel. When wisdom is abandoned, even the strongest of fortresses will crumble.



Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Despite such strong statements concerning the success of the righteous over the wicked, Solomon admitted that the righteous are not always blessed with wealth and success. He acknowledged that the rich, even the wealthy wicked, often receive special treatment from society. On the other hand, the poor are often mistreated just because of their economic status. Perhaps for this reason, Solomon encouraged his readers to be kind to the needy. To treat the poor with contempt is a sin against God (Prov. 14:20, 21).

The general principle that righteous actions produce success and wicked actions produce failure can be seen in every avenue of life. People who plot against others fail. Those who plan to do good succeed

in business and in their personal lives. They are blessed with loving relationships and riches (vs. 22).

Righteous people who work hard tend to become wealthy. While foolish people talk about success, in the

end many end up paupers because they were unwilling to back up their boasting with productive action (vs. 23).

Solomon taught his readers to judge a person's moral character by the fruits of his or her life. The fruits of practicing

wisdom are success and prosperity that the wise can wear like a crown. Persons who practice folly are trapped in a cycle of failure from which they might never escape. Persons who lie about their neighbors will be distrusted and hated by the community. But a person who tells the truth is honored as a role model by those who know him or her (vss. 24, 25).

Ask Yourself . . . *Whose wisdom do I admire the most? Why?*

Again, Solomon and the other sages of Israel taught that the key to living such a successful life is fearing God. The persons who obey God and place their trust in Him feel as secure as any king in a fortress. Such a person will strongly influence his or her children to fear God as well (vs. 26).

Not only will this respect for God protect the righteous person from harm, but it will also enrich his or her life. The "fountain of life" (vs. 27) the righteous will receive symbolizes the great abundance of wisdom, wealth, and relationships they enjoy during their lifetime.

Again, the proverbs do not promise material riches for the righteous. They do promise, however, an eternal, intangible wealth to the wise that can never be taken away from them.

d The Glory of Kings (14:28-35)

**A large population is a king's glory,
but without subjects a prince is ruined. . . .**

**A king delights in a wise servant,
but a shameful servant arouses his fury.**

—Proverbs 14:28, 35

Solomon taught his readers that every person, despite his or her social status, is important to God. Since every person is important to the Lord, every person should be viewed and treated with respect. Wise kings understood that their kingdom's success rested upon the shoulders of the common person. In ancient days a monarch's power was measured by the size of his or her kingdom. Without loyal subjects, the leader of a country would soon

come to ruin (vs. 28).

Solomon constantly taught about the value of self-control. The king wanted his readers to acknowledge feelings of anger but not be mastered by them. The Hebrew term translated "quick-tempered" (vs. 29) essentially means "lacking in spirit." Such a person is impatient and tends to react to situations before considering the consequences.

Ask Yourself . . . *Under what circumstances am I most likely to get angry quickly?*

Another aspect of self-control is dealing with the "green-eyed monster" of envy. Like anger, envy has been a catalyst in much of the world's suffering. For that reason the tenth commandment warns against coveting (see Exod. 20:17). Envy goes beyond just wishing to have something similar to what your neighbor possesses. It is resenting your neighbor for what he or she owns and desiring to take it away. Even without acting on these feelings, harboring such an attitude is sinful and self-destructive. Left unchecked, envy will corrupt a person to the bone. The best guard against envy is to be content with whatever God has provided (Prov. 14:30).

Though Solomon often claimed that poverty is the result of laziness, he also encouraged his readers to be kind to the poor (vss. 31, 32). In general, when Solomon referred to the poor, he did not imply that they were in their plight because of foolishness. The king considered

mistreatment of the poor to be an insult to God. In contrast, showing kindness to the poor honors God.

Solomon acknowledged that even fools occasionally demonstrate wisdom. But for the discerning, wisdom is second nature and does not come and go in spurts (vs. 33).

Wisdom can be demonstrated collectively. Even nations, when they act wisely, can gain an exalted position in the world. When a nation abandons God's standards of morality, however, it suffers from within and from without (vs. 34). Israel's level of prosperity was directly related to its spiritual health. When the nation fell into idolatry, it was oppressed from every side. When the people of Israel repented and returned to the Lord, they were blessed with times of peace.

The king understood the value of loyal, competent servants. If the king's subjects acted wisely, the kingdom would run smoothly and the monarch would be pleased. The servant who acted shamefully, however, was a disgrace to the king (vs. 35).

This principle demonstrates itself well in today's business world. When individual employees show initiative and stretch beyond their abilities, then the company tends to grow and the employees are rewarded. On the other hand, when individuals act only in ways that will advance their personal agendas, companies suffer and morale heads downhill.

Proverbs 15 in Brief

Solomon encouraged his readers to choose their words wisely. Gentle answers promote peaceful relationships. A person's wisdom is often judged by his or her words. Wise words can heal hurts, prolong life, and lift up spirits. In contrast, foolish words cause suffering, hasten death, and crush a person's hope. Solomon also used this chapter to emphasize the awesome power of God, as well as His disgust with meaningless religious gestures. The power of God was not limited to the boundaries of Israel. He was watching over the wicked and the good everywhere in the world.

8

The Sovereignty of God

Proverbs 16—17

a God's Purposes (16:1-8)

Commit to the LORD whatever you
do,
and he will establish your plans.
The LORD works out everything to
its proper end—
even the wicked for a day of
disaster.

—Proverbs 16:3, 4

The relationship between God's sovereignty and human free will has been hotly debated over the centuries. Some people believe that God operates with a hands-off policy toward human history. According to this perspective, people's choices basically determine the course of events. Others view history as predestined by God. According to this view, humanity is acting out the script that God has already written. Many believe the truth lies somewhere between these two perspectives. The following proverbs show that Solomon was also fully engaged in the question of predestination and free will.

Even though people make their own plans, God directs the results

of those plans—even the very words that are used to communicate those proposals (vs. 1). Perhaps Solomon was thinking about the story of Balaam when he wrote this proverb (see Num. 22). Even though Balaam considered placing a curse on the people of Israel for Balak, the king of Moab, God's words for him were only blessings. Though Solomon believed that God allowed people to make plans contrary to His will, in the end God's purposes will be accomplished.

God is not only aware of people's plans, but He also knows the motives behind those plans. Rationalization may cover a multitude of sins, but nothing can be hidden from God (Prov. 16:2). The word translated "pure" was often used to describe unmixed oils. The reference to God weighing motives might have a slight allusion to the Egyptian practice of weighing a person's heart after death to determine the depth of that person's integrity.

In light of God's sovereignty and knowledge, the only wise course of action is to commit one's plans to God. This type of commitment requires an attitude of humility and a willingness to change our plans

if necessary. If we demonstrate an unswerving commitment to accomplish the will of God, then our proposals cannot fail (vs. 3).

Ask Yourself . . . *What plans can I present to the Lord this week?*

God's sovereignty extends even to those who refuse to acknowledge His lordship. There are no loose ends in God's plan; He even has a purpose for the wicked (vs. 4).

The Bible is replete with examples of God using wicked people to accomplish His goals. For instance, God used Pharaoh's hard heart to orchestrate a spectacular rescue of His people. He used the Assyrians and Babylonians to drive idolatry far from the hearts of His people. He used Judas as a catalyst for Christ's atoning work on the cross. Nobody, no matter how evil, can thwart what God intends to accomplish.

Though the wicked are unwitting accomplices in God's plans, they

will one day be held accountable for their actions. Though justice might not occur instantly, the king assured his readers that the day of retribution will come (vs. 5).

God's power and desire are not limited to punishment. He consistently offers the wicked the opportunity to repent. By God's love and faithfulness, they can receive atonement for their sins. Once sin is atoned for, it can be avoided by nurturing our relationship with God (vs. 6). The closer we get to God, the less appealing sin becomes.

The person who is focused on pleasing God does not have to worry about his or her enemies. A lifestyle that honors God can be disarming to one's adversaries. Jesus often taught about reaching out to enemies in ways they did not expect—like returning blessings for their insults and compassion for their indifference (see Luke 6:28). While this kind of behavior might

The Name of **Yahweh**

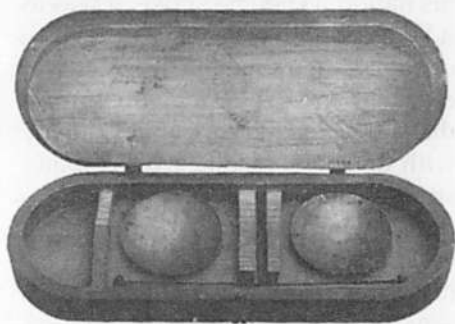
The Book of Proverbs uses Israel's personal name for God, Yahweh, almost exclusively when He is mentioned. The name is represented in English Bibles as "LORD." The general Hebrew term for God (Elohim) is used only a handful of times throughout the book (see 2:5, 17; 3:4; 25:2; 30:5, 9).

In contrast, Ecclesiastes, traditionally attributed to Solomon, never once mentions God by the name of Yahweh. Scholars are uncertain as to the reason for this change. It has been suggested that Solomon's deteriorating relationship with God might have been the reason for the king's failure to use the sacred name.

antagonize some people, it usually causes the godly person's foes to back off. In addition, God often uses enemies to discipline His wandering children; He certainly did this with the nation of Israel and its errant kings. If there is no ungodly behavior that needs to be corrected, however, then there is no need to inflict this type of discipline (Prov. 16:7).

Solomon reminded his readers that it is better to live within modest means with a clear conscience than to have great wealth obtained by deceptive means. In this verse, righteousness is contrasted with injustice, so the injustice described here must be personal immoral behavior. Great riches will eventually crumble if they are tarnished by unethical behavior (vs. 8).

An honest day's work for an honest day's wage is still the best way to get a good night's sleep.



Solomon said that honest scales and balances (used in business) were from the Lord (Prov. 16:11). Ancient Egyptians kept their bronze merchant scales in wooden boxes.

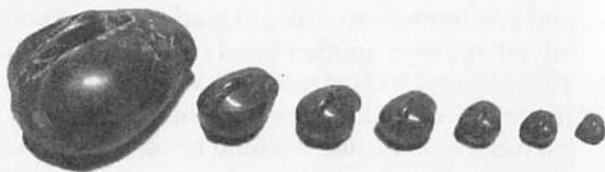
Photo: © Metropolitan Museum

b A Godly King (16:9-16)

**Kings detest wrongdoing,
for a throne is established
through righteousness.**

—Proverbs 16:12

Again Solomon spoke of the relationship between human plans and God's sovereignty. Though a person might create elaborate plans for a course of action, ultimately the Lord takes that person in the direction He wants him or her to go (vs. 9). For



The Egyptians and Assyrians used domed weights and measures shaped like ducks. Hebrew weights were usually ball-shaped and much simpler.

this reason it is utterly foolish not to acknowledge God in our plans. Nothing that goes against His purposes can be accomplished anyway.

In Bible times, the king functioned as God's personal representative to his nation. When he spoke, it was as if he were delivering the very words of God. When the king judged a case that was brought before him, he dispensed the justice of God. Along with this power came great responsibility. Since the Lord set the standard of right and wrong, the king had to be careful to be impartial and just. Otherwise, he would misrepresent the Lord's will (vs. 10).

The Lord detests any unethical behavior in business. The use of honest weights and measures used in bartering is a reflection of the character of God (vs. 11). Moses made it clear that the weights used in business transactions were not to be manipulated in any way. A businessperson should not have two sets of weights—one heavier and one lighter—in order to gain an advantage over another (see Lev. 19:36; Deut. 25:13). Amos and Micah made it clear that the use of dishonest weights in business would bring about God's judgment (see Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:11).

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever been the victim of a double standard?*

Solomon assumed that any king should behave in a just and righteous manner. After all, God had placed the king on the throne and could just as easily remove him if he did not behave appropriately.

Therefore, a king who acted as a proper representative of God would hate injustice as much as the Lord did. Such a king would also value wise and godly behavior in his subjects (Prov. 16:12, 13).

Because of his status as God's representative, a king would reward the righteous and punish the wicked on God's behalf. The king had the power of life and death over his subjects. The wicked might even show more respect for the king than they did for God. The righteous would see their service to the king as an act of reverence for God.

Sometimes the king's anger might become irrational; if provoked, he might even call for a few heads to roll. A wise person in the king's court would know how to appease such a temper. In contrast, when the king was doing well, the whole kingdom would prosper (vss. 14, 15). Psalm 72:15-17 describes how the whole nation was blessed when the favor of God was upon the king.

Though many of us today might have difficulty in appreciating such a solemn attitude toward a human king, we can still learn from Solomon's attitude of respect and responsibility. Jesus made it clear that the way we treat others reflects the level of our respect for Him. In a sense, we should treat all people as if they were royalty.

Once again Solomon exalted the infinite value of wisdom, even over great riches. Wealth and wisdom aren't necessarily incompatible, but wealth without wisdom only leads to exploitation (Prov. 16:16).



The Highway of the Upright (16:17-24)

The highway of the upright avoids evil;

**those who guard their ways
preserve their lives.**

—Proverbs 16:17

After teaching his readers about the responsibilities of the king, Solomon returned to practical lessons for the common person. No matter what a person's station in life is, everyone is on a journey.

The king strongly desired that his readers travel that journey on the "highway of the upright" (vs. 17).

Solomon warned his readers that they will have to live wisely and honestly to remain on this highway. If they stray from it, their physical and spiritual life will be in danger. It is common for people to downplay the seriousness of the consequences of wrongdoing. Actions once considered "no big deal" are seen in their true light when we face the results of those actions.

One of the tempting side paths that will lead a person off the "highway of the upright" is the detour of

As Sweet as Honey

Solomon compared pleasant words to a honeycomb—sweet to the soul and healing to the bones (Prov. 16:24). Honey was a favored food in ancient Israel. It is a sweet syrup produced by bees. There is no evidence that the Hebrews practiced beekeeping, but the Egyptians were apparently very good at it. Sometimes in ancient literature "honey" really refers to thick grape or date syrup. In Bible times, honey was used as a primary sweetener in cooking. The freed Hebrew slave in the wilderness looked forward to a "land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:8). A weary Jonathan, son of King Saul, ate honey and claimed that his "eyes brightened" immediately upon eating it (I Sam. 14:29). The sweetness of honey was so appreciated that it was often used in metaphorical expressions throughout Scripture (Judg. 14:18; Ps. 19:10; Ezek. 3:3; Rev. 10:9, 10).

pride. Solomon warned his readers that taking this path will lead to their destruction. An arrogant spirit is a sure sign that trouble is just around the corner. According to the king, it is better to be in poverty—even slavery—with a humble heart than to be rich with a proud spirit (vss. 18, 19).

To stay on the “highway of the upright,” a person needs to have a teachable spirit. Such an attitude is not only open to learning from others, but also compels the hearer to respectfully question what is being taught. A wise person is humble but not gullible. Such a person gains a reputation for his or her discernment. The words of the wise are instructive because they are appropriate and persuasive (vss. 20-21, 23).

Ask Yourself . . . *Who do I know that can be persuasive without being manipulative?*

A person’s potential in life is directly proportionate to the amount of wisdom he or she possesses. To the wise, understanding serves as a fountain of life that nurtures growth. Fools, on the other hand, will eventually dry up for lack of resources. All they have to look forward to is retribution for their sins (vs. 22).

Another distracting side road of the “highway of the upright” is the abuse of the tongue. If people stay on the right path, their words will be a blessing to themselves and others. Their words will be as easy to accept as honey on a warm biscuit. In Solomon’s time, honey was appreciated

for its sweet taste and perceived healing powers. Solomon knew that sweet words can teach and encourage those who listen. They can also bring wealth and honor to the person speaking. The source of the person’s sweet words is his or her godly spirit (vs. 24).

d **Personality Profiles** **(16:25-33)**

**A perverse person stirs up conflict,
and a gossip separates close
friends.**

—Proverbs 16:28

Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25 are identical. Perhaps this proverb was included twice in this collection because of the importance of the truth it represents. Behavior that seems right to a person may eventually lead to disaster. The mind has a great capacity for rationalization. Almost any action can be justified as good, moral, or beneficial. The best guard against deceiving ourselves is to run our ideas past people who are wiser and more experienced than ourselves. If something is amiss, usually a mature, objective set of eyes can detect the problem.

Almost anyone who has ever read a self-help book has encountered some type of personality profile test. These tests ask specific personality-based questions, evaluate the answers, then supply the test-taker

with a descriptive summary of his or her personality type. Since certain personalities tend to follow specific patterns of behavior, these tests can be amazingly accurate.

Ask Yourself . . . *What is my personality type?*

Solomon was also a student of personality types. He knew that certain types of people tend to behave in certain ways. Though occasionally a person might break out from his or her normal pattern, such a deviation is usually short-lived. Only a change of heart, empowered by the Holy Spirit, can change a behavior pattern over the long term.

Solomon realized that by understanding an individual's personality type, he could accurately predict that person's future behaviors. Such knowledge proved invaluable to him as he dealt with the political intrigues of his royal court. By knowing who might threaten his position and how he or she might go about it, he was able to diffuse many potentially volatile situations.

Solomon knew he could count on the hardworking laborer who took responsibility for his or her own needs. Such a worker is motivated by his or her physical and emotional hunger; this person is not likely to wait around for a handout (vs. 26).

The king knew that no matter how peace-loving a proven troublemaker might appear to be on the outside, he or she is probably busy planning something destructive. If such a person isn't closely monitored, he or she could start a politi-

cal fire that could scorch the entire kingdom (vs. 27). Knowing this protected Solomon from the scheming of his brother Adonijah and possibly saved the kingdom from civil war (see I Kings 2:22-25).

Left unchecked, troublemakers stir up dissension and gossips ruin other people's relationships (Prov. 16:28). Many a friendship has been destroyed over a juicy bit of gossip that should have been left unsaid. Sometimes a person's facial expressions and mannerisms expose his or her evil intentions (vs. 30).

Violent people tend to have excellent recruiting skills (vs. 29). The exponential growth of gangs in today's inner cities attests to this. King David's commander Joab was a prime example of a person prone to violence. Only his own violent death put a stop to his brutal behavior.

Solomon understood that wisdom is best learned through life experience. It is not surprising that he held his elders in high esteem and considered their gray hair to be a sign of wisdom and dignity. He saw such people as examples of the rewards of living a righteous life (vs. 31).

If Solomon's son Rehoboam would have held the elders of his court in the same high esteem as his father, he would not have followed the harsh advice of his young friends. Sadly, Rehoboam also ignored his father's teaching about controlling his temper. When he became king, he reacted like an enraged, short-sighted animal (see I Kings 12:12-17). Patience is better than power. The person who can

control his or her emotions is of greater value to God than the hot tempered warrior who conquers nations (Prov. 16:32).

As it began, this chapter ends on a note about God's sovereignty. In the Old Testament, decisions were made and land was distributed by casting lots or dice. But even the roll of the dice was under God's control. Every human decision that has been and can be made is used by God to accomplish His purposes (vs. 33).

Proverbs 17 in Brief

In chapter 17, Solomon commented on such topics as contentment, inheritance, arrogance, dishonesty, grandchildren, quarreling, and friendship.

Some of his proverbs were intended to gauge proper behavior. Other proverbs are merely observations about the human condition.

In this chapter, Solomon encouraged his readers to strengthen their relationships in business, friendships, and family as well. He emphasized the importance of seeking peace with others whenever possible. Being a good friend involves forgiving past wrongs and remaining faithful. We should choose friends carefully.

A Roll of the Dice

The use of the lot to determine doubtful questions was a common practice in the ancient world. Lots were small marked objects like pebbles, sticks, or pieces of pottery. Although the exact method of casting lots remains unclear, some think the objects were placed in a jar with a narrow neck. Then when the container was shaken, only one piece was thrown out. The act was usually preceded by a prayer, appealing to a god for guidance.

The ancient Israelites believed that their God controlled the outcome of the lot and expressed His will through its use. Achan's sin was made public by lot (Josh. 7:18). The land of Canaan was divided among the 12 tribes by lot (Josh. 14:2). The ministerial order of the priests was decided by lot (1 Chron. 24:5). Whether Barsabbas or Matthias should replace Judas Iscariot as apostle was also decided by lot (Acts 1:26). There is no mention of the church using the lot to discover God's will after the choosing of Matthias.

9

Words to the Unwise

Proverbs 18—19

a The Unfriendly Person (18:1-8)

An unfriendly person pursues selfish ends;
and against all sound judgment starts quarrels.

—Proverbs 18:1

Being a wise father does not always guarantee one will have a wise son. It is ironic that Solomon's description of the unfriendly person in this section so aptly applies to his son Rehoboam. Within days of claiming the throne of Israel after Solomon's death, Rehoboam split the kingdom in two with his selfishness and arrogance.

Solomon warned his readers about behaving selfishly. He realized that not even a king could accomplish his goals without paying attention to the interests of those around him. Though he might use military might to force people to do his will, such an approach was doomed to failure. Since such selfishness was self-defeating, Solomon believed it made no sense to behave in such an unfriendly manner (vs. 1).

Solomon also warned his readers

against being close-minded. The person who thinks he or she is always right has no reason to listen to other perspectives. People who believe that their way is the only way are playing the fool. It is better to first listen to other opinions and consider what is being said before blurting out one's own thoughts (vs. 2).

Four words that can quickly build goodwill are, "What do you think?" Solomon also encouraged his readers to be honest in their words. Solomon equated deception with wickedness. The "deep waters" (vs. 4) he referred to suggest the concealment of truth. Deep, still waters tend to be dark and murky below the surface. It is difficult to see through them to the bottom. Wise words, in contrast, are clear and refreshing like a rushing stream. One can easily see the bottom of a moving creek. Contempt and reproach await the person who uses deceptive words for selfish ends (vs. 3).

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time I was fooled by deceptive words?*

Honesty in action is as vital as honesty in words. Solomon warned his readers against practicing

The Foolish Son

Solomon described the unfriendly person as one who pursues selfish gain and goes against sound judgment (Prov. 18:1). Solomon's son Rehoboam fits this description to a tee (1 Kings 12:1-24).

Upon Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam became king in his place. When the people of Israel requested that Rehoboam lessen the heavy tax burden that Solomon had imposed on them, he was torn between two sets of advisers. His older advisers suggested that he respond to them in a compassionate tone. His younger friends advised him to respond harshly.

When Rehoboam decided to follow the foolish advice of his friends, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel immediately turned away from him and appointed a new king for themselves, Jeroboam. The nation of Israel never again united after Rehoboam's attempt to establish his power.

favoritism in their judgments. Whether rich or poor, royal or common, all people are to be judged impartially under God's laws. Special care is to be taken to be fair to widows, orphans, and foreigners. In God's economy, the powerless are to be treated on the same plane as the powerful. Other proverbs emphasize the importance of not depriving the innocent of justice (vs. 5; see 17:26; 31:5).

The final character traits of unfriendly people have to do with their habits of quarreling and gossiping. Solomon repeatedly warned his readers not to practice either of these foolish forms of communication. People who are looking for fights usually find them. The results of the confrontations are sometimes physically painful for the antagonist. Even if the fool survives the quarrel, such divisive behavior could easily result in bitterness and loneliness (18:6, 7).

Just as the person who quarrels hurts himself or herself, the gossip hurts others. While watching the behavior of the royal court, Solomon discovered that many persons enjoyed hearing gossip. Often, such persons craved gossip in much the same way as others crave a delicacy. Solomon described the gossip's words as "choice morsels" (vs. 8). Such tasty tidbits might seem pleasant going down, but in the end they sicken the spirit of the hearer.

To possess significant information about another person carries with it great responsibility. When a person's reputation is injured because

of the indiscreet distribution of sensitive news, God will hold the messengers accountable.

Ask Yourself . . . *What harm have I seen or experienced that resulted from a false rumor?*



Security in God (18:9-17)

**The name of the LORD is a fortified tower;
the righteous run to it and are safe.**

—Proverbs 18:10

Solomon realized the security that many people find in things is nothing but an illusion. As a powerful, wealthy king, he would have been tempted to believe that his money, social status, and military would keep him safe from all danger. However, the king knew better. As a student of biblical history, he had heard about the invincible Pharaoh being overwhelmed by weaponless Hebrew slaves. His father had probably told him many stories about the demise of Saul. During his 40-year reign, he certainly saw men at the zenith of success suddenly plunge into ruin. Solomon realized that placing security in material things is foolishness. Apart from God, there is no safety.

A person who has a false sense of security usually becomes sluggish and unmotivated in his or her job.

Solomon compared a person who is slack in his or her work to someone who destroys the work of others (vs. 9).

Though such a comparison might at first sound exaggerated, there is much truth in it. The success of any project rests on the quality put into every job related to that project. For example, a person who compromises on the foundation of a building could cause the destruction of the entire building—no matter how strong the walls. This person would ruin not just his or her own work, but the work of others as well. People who are sluggish in their work also have a demoralizing effect on those who want to be productive.

The only true security to deal with any of life's difficulties rests in a reconciled and growing relationship with God. Solomon compared the name of the Lord to a strong tower that the righteous could run to whenever they were in danger. In revealing His name as "LORD" (Yahweh, which means "I am who I am"), the Lord was describing His uniqueness to the Israelites. Nothing or no one else could protect them like Yahweh (vs. 10).

Instead of running to the Lord for safety, some people seek security in riches. Solomon taught that a person's wealth can be a hindrance to recognizing his or her dependence upon God. A person can decide to trust in his or her family's wealth and influential name instead of turning to Yahweh. Such people imagine their money fortress has unscalable walls. But



Solomon described some people in conflict as unyielding as the barred gates of a citadel (Prov. 18:19). This is a picture of the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem.

like the apparently impenetrable walls of Jericho, they crumble when the time of God's judgment arrives. In the end, the person who trusted in wealth is surrounded by the rubble of his or her own arrogance. Only humility and faith in God can save such a person from this type of disaster. As pride serves as a warning signal for disaster, so

humility indicates that God's favor is on its way (vss. 11, 12).

In addition to trusting in God, Solomon wanted his readers to develop good relationships with the people in their community. He taught them to carefully listen to other people's opinions and feelings before sharing their own. People who ignore this advice usually find themselves in awkward and embarrassing situations (vs. 13).

Solomon said that an upbeat spirit can sustain a person during sickness. Medical science has often testified that those who have a will to live usually have a better chance at surviving serious illnesses. However, the person who has a crushed spirit, even though physically healthy, can quickly plunge into the depths of depression (vs. 14). The presence of hope means everything when it comes to physical and emotional health.

A person who has discernment will naturally acquire more wisdom. Solomon said the ears of the wise seek out knowledge (vs. 15). We can assume from his choice of the ears over the mouth that more wisdom is gained from listening than from talking.

The wise person may find it expedient to be on friendly terms with people of power. Sometimes a token gift opens the doors of access (vs. 16). Solomon was not encouraging bribery here. The king was simply encouraging his readers to use worldly, temporal resources to benefit others in order to establish relationships that could have eternal



Solomon said that some rich people perceive their wealth to be an unscalable wall (Prov. 18:11). This is part of the ancient wall of Nineveh, rebuilt this century with some of the original stones. The Ninevites thought their wealth and walls would protect them, but they, too, fell when God's judgment came.

significance. Jesus taught something similar in Luke 16:9: "Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

Ask Yourself . . . *How could I use my resources to build relationships?*

Solomon ended this section with an admonition to his readers to hear both sides of the story before coming to a decision (Prov. 18:17). Unchallenged, the first perspective heard often seems compelling. When the other side of the story is presented, however, new questions often come to the surface.

When juries are given instructions before deliberations, they are told to withhold judgment until both sides have presented their cases. We would also do well to suspend judgment on a dispute until we have heard both sides of the story.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever changed*

my opinion about a dispute after hearing a different perspective on the problem?

C True Friendship (18:18-24)

**One who has unreliable friends
soon comes to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks
closer than a brother.**

—Proverbs 18:24

Solomon believed that one of the greatest blessings a person can enjoy in life is being involved in healthy friendships. Therefore, he spent much time instructing his readers in the best ways to develop, protect, and if necessary, heal those relationships. He realized that sometimes even the best of relationships can face a crisis. Minor disagreements left unresolved can easily turn into

major battles. Better to resolve a problem early than allow it to fester within the people involved.

To stop such hostilities from escalating, Solomon advised his readers to remain open-minded. He warned against becoming unyielding and closing the door on compromise.

Some people, once offended, may refuse to negotiate. Any compromise is seen as an affront to personal dignity. If a compromise cannot be negotiated, Solomon advised, the antagonists should cast lots to settle the dispute and then abide by the outcome. A modern-day counterpart to this is binding arbitration. Since the Israelites believed that Yahweh's will was expressed by casting lots, a dispute could be settled before it escalated into a bloody conflict (vss. 18, 19).

An essential element for maintaining a healthy relationship is controlling what we say. The same tongue that can heal and nurture a relationship can also crush it. The agricultural metaphors used by Solomon in verse 20 indicate that a person's words can bear much fruit and be a significant source of personal satisfaction. The tongue is so influential that it holds "the power of life and death" (vs. 21).

If we cherish our words enough to choose them carefully, then we will be satisfied with the fruit they bear. If our words are used to tear down, manipulate, or control, then the only fruit they bear will be full of worms.

Ask Yourself . . . *Is there anything I can do to make my words better serve my relationships?*

One of the most significant relationships in life can be the marriage relationship. Despite Solomon's large harem, he still considered a good wife to be one of God's greatest blessings to a man (vs. 22). Unlike the Song of Songs, which focuses on romantic love, this proverb seems to emphasize the partnership aspect of marriage. Mutual respect is one of the keys to a healthy marriage. Other proverbs suggest that having a contentious and quarrelsome wife could be as much a curse as a good wife is a blessing (see 21:9).

Social and economic standing often determines a person's demeanor. Usually the poor are humble when asking for help, but the rich feel like they can throw their weight around (18:23).

The Old Testament puts great emphasis on close family relationships. However, Solomon believed that a good friend can be more loyal than a brother. Solomon warned his readers not to confuse such a loyal companion with a "fair-weather" friend. Friends of convenience may tolerate even bad treatment from those they believe can reward or help them. However, if these people suddenly lose their wealth or influence, they are quickly cast aside. In contrast, a loyal friend will stay true to the relationship even if there is nothing to gain. Such a friendship should be prized and protected (vs. 24).

If you choose friends on the basis of what they can do for you, you might find yourself alone when trouble comes. When committing

yourself to a friend, make the decision to stand by that person no matter what.



False Friends (19:1-7)

**Wealth attracts many friends,
but even the closest friend of the
poor person deserts them.
—Proverbs 19:4**

Solomon taught that wealth is useless, perhaps even dangerous, without a righteous spirit. It is better to be poor and have integrity than to be a wealthy fool with a filthy mouth (vs. 1).

The world is full of people with strong enthusiasm. But sometimes their desire leads them to acts of violence and destruction. These could be described as having "desire without knowledge" (vs. 2). While the Lord wants us to be enthusiastic about the kingdom of God, He does not want our enthusiasm to lead us to actions and attitudes that will dishonor Him. In our passion, we may miss what is most important. We may spend our lives climbing a ladder, only to find that it's leaning against the wrong wall.

The person who blames God for his or her own failures is a fool (vs. 3). Wisdom is demonstrated by those who accept personal respon-

The Gift That Opens Doors

Solomon taught that a gift brought to a ruler would curry favor with that leader (Prov. 19:6). It was customary in Bible times to bring large gifts to a king when approaching him for a diplomatic meeting. To attempt to approach a monarch without some sort of gift was considered an insult in that culture.

Perhaps Solomon had one of his most famous visitors in mind when he wrote this proverb. When the queen of Sheba visited him, she brought a great caravan carrying over four and one-half tons of gold, precious stones, and exotic spices. After her visit, no one ever again brought so many spices to the king. Perhaps because of her gifts, "King Solomon gave the queen of Sheba all she desired and asked for" (I Kings 10:13).

sibility for the consequences of their decisions and actions.

Winners of the lottery often report that persons they hadn't seen in years suddenly appear at their door after hearing of their good fortune. Within an instant, once-lonely people suddenly have more friends than they know what to do with. But who are their real friends? As king and one of the wealthiest men in the history, Solomon would have appreciated the position these heirs often find themselves in. He probably questioned the sincerity of the many persons who rushed to proclaim their friendship with him (vs. 4a).

On the other end of the spectrum are people who quickly desert associates who suddenly become poor. No matter how desperately the needy seek the help of former friends, they are shunned (vss. 4b, 6, 7). At times Solomon may have wished he could give up his wealth and power so he could discover who his genuine friends were.

Ask Yourself . . . *What would happen to my friendships if I suddenly lost everything?*

Solomon warned his readers about the consequences of being a false witness. The reference here is to law cases. Even today it is tempting to stretch the truth to assure victory in a legal matter. Solomon strongly warned his readers that

people who commit perjury will be punished. Though they might win their case, they will not escape the consequences of their sin (vs. 5).

Viewing people as commodities is not an attitude restricted to Solomon's time or to the upper class of society. As Christians we must always be on guard against seeing people as tools to promote our agendas. We must be careful not to befriend people on the basis of what they can do for us. We cannot claim to be messengers of God's unconditional love while at the same time favoring one person over another.

Proverbs 19:8-29 in Brief

Solomon concluded chapter 19 by discussing such issues as perjury, forgiveness, leadership, laziness, discipline, marriage, and the human desire for love.

10

Pitfalls to Avoid

Proverbs 20:1—22:16

a Human Sinfulness (20:1-9)

Who can say, "I have kept my heart
pure;
I am clean and without sin?"
—Proverbs 20:9

Though Solomon's teachings encourage his readers to avoid sin, he was fully aware that even the wisest people sometimes fail. However, Solomon did not view this possibility as a license to give up on righteousness. Instead, he

wanted his readers to be aware of the common stumbling blocks that lay ahead of them so they could sidestep these obstacles if and when they appeared.

One common stumbling block is alcohol. Throughout its history, Israel has been a wine-producing and wine-consuming country. Except for the sect of the Recabites (see Jer. 35), the production and use of wine was a commonly accepted practice. Solomon was fully aware of the risks drinking alcohol involve. Its misuse can easily change a wise person to a fool. The consumption of alcohol can change a thoughtful, peaceful person into a quarrelor and a brawler. Therefore, Solomon strongly warned his readers about the dangers of drinking (Prov. 20:1).

Another common stumbling block his readers would encounter is uncontrolled anger and the conflicts that result. Provoking someone's anger can lead to a



An ancient winepress. Solomon warned against the abuse of wine and other alcohol.

violent encounter. Getting the king mad could get you killed! Solomon was aware that there are some conflicts that cannot be avoided. However, he also realized that most conflicts can be dealt with before they become troublesome. He encouraged his readers to practice self-control, not only in their tempers, but also in the ways they respond to the anger of others (vss. 2, 3).

The next stumbling block is laziness. Farmers usually plowed their fields after reaping their last crops in autumn. Plowing prepared the soil for the spring planting. The sluggard, on the other hand, consistently failed to plow. Perhaps he or she had an excuse: it was too cold, it was too warm, it was too soon, etc. Some people procrastinate in order to give themselves an excuse to fail. No matter what the excuse, however, the result was the same. There would be a poor crop, if any, to be harvested the next season. Even after doing nothing, the lazy person still looks for a harvest, but always finds none (vs. 4).

Another stumbling block is being the victim of deception. Solomon undoubtedly encountered many people who claimed to be loyal to him—only to discover later that they just wanted to take advantage of him. He attempted to teach his readers how to ferret out such deceptive people. Solomon equated discovering a person's true motives with drawing water from a deep well (vss. 5, 6). Though this advice may sound cynical at first, there is great wisdom in it. If we can learn to see

through deceivers, we will be free to invest more energy into healthier relationships.

Though Solomon's numerous children were assured of a sizable financial inheritance, he believed that the greatest inheritance he could leave them was an example of wisdom and integrity (vs. 7). Without such an example they would probably quickly waste their material wealth anyway.

This proverb is as relevant today as in Solomon's time. It is easy for parents and grandparents to become carried away with fulfilling their children's desires for toys, clothes, and other material items. Though there is nothing wrong with most of these things, there is a hidden danger involved. If the pursuit of material items takes priority over the pursuit of wisdom, then children will look for security in the wrong places when they become adults.

Ask Yourself . . . *To whom am I leaving a legacy of righteousness?*

The king who was experienced in judging matters had a knack for seeing who was telling him the truth and who was trying to put one over on him (vs. 8). A person's demeanor, attitude, and even mannerisms could reveal the depth of that person's integrity.

In his message at the dedication of the temple, Solomon admitted that there was no one who could claim to be sinless (see I Kings 8:46). Here in Proverbs, he repeated the same truth (Prov. 20:9). Not even God's chosen king could claim to be unblemished

spiritually. The stumbling block of religious arrogance is perhaps the most dangerous obstacle to spiritual growth.



Personal Ethics (20:10-18)

**Even small children are known by
their actions,
so is their conduct really pure
and upright?**

—Proverbs 20:11

Proverbs was compiled to be a practical, down-to-earth book. It was designed to offer sound advice for living a successful life. Solomon probably did not intend his proverbs to be a discussion about theological ideas. Instead, he wanted them to teach his readers personal ethics. He wanted his readers to know how to live wisely and righteously here and now.

In Bible times, merchants often carried stones of different sizes with them to weigh quantities of silver for payment. Dishonest merchants would mislabel the weight of the stones so as to cheat the person they were doing business with. The Bible plainly condemned such actions (see Lev. 19:35). Solomon taught his readers that such a dishonest business practice was a sin against God as well as other people (Prov. 20:10).

Though contemporary merchants do not use stones to measure quantities of silver, the principle of this

proverb still applies. Today there are many high-tech ways to tip the scales. Dishonesty in business, however, is still detested by God. Any businessperson who knowingly deceives a customer should expect to be disciplined by the Lord.

Solomon taught that a person's character could be judged by watching his or her behavior. Even a child's integrity can be seen in his or her actions (vs. 11). Jesus taught a similar lesson when He stated that a tree would be known by its fruit (see Matt. 7:16, 17). Righteous behavior is the natural, obedient response to a loving relationship with God.

Solomon reminded his readers that God created the human body. He gifted people with ears to hear and eyes to see. For this reason we should use these members of our bodies to glorify God (Prov. 20:12).

The person who loves his or her bed too much will soon come to poverty. While a good night's sleep is healthy, people who can't get out of bed will have a hard time holding down a job (vs. 13).

As a part of his practical education, Solomon taught his readers to be smart shoppers. Shopping in Solomon's time was much different than shopping in the Western world today. Back then, there were no price tags on the products. Prices were agreed on by bargaining. To get the best possible price, the buyer would question the quality of the product. After he or she walked away with the "inferior" item, the buyer would boast about what a great deal he or she got (vs. 14).



Solomon suggested that a lender take the garment of someone who puts up security for a loan (Prov. 20:16). Such a garment would probably be something like the cloak this figure is wearing.

Once again Solomon exalted wisdom—and its verbal manifestations—over great riches. In fact, he used the metaphor of a jewel to describe the value of an aptly spoken word (vs. 15).

Though institutional banking as we know it was not available in Solomon's time, loaning money was an accepted practice. The person borrowing the money was usually expected to provide some type of pledge or collateral. A poor man could give his cloak as a pledge (see Deut. 24:10-13). Since the cloak was often the only means a poor man

would have to cover himself against the night's chill, the lender was expected to return it to him before sunset (see Exod. 22:26, 27).

Sometimes a third party was brought into the agreement to put up security for the one accepting the loan. The modern equivalent to this action would be serving as a cosigner. In Proverbs 6 Solomon warned his readers not to guarantee a loan. Here he appeared to warn his readers that those who put up security for a stranger, or for a woman who has not been faithful to her husband, should be considered unreliable. Such a person should have to give up his or her cloak in pledge as well (Prov. 20:16). Solomon made no mention about returning the cloak before sunset. By his silence on this issue he might have been implying that the lender should not count on seeing his or her money again.

Solomon was aware that sinful behavior can often be enjoyable. He never attempted to hide this truth from his readers. Instead, he pointed out that the enjoyment that comes from sinful acts is usually short-lived. This kind of pleasure is quickly replaced by painful consequences. Solomon chose stealing as a concrete example. The king explained that though a thief might enjoy the sweetness of stolen riches, the "candy" will eventually taste like gravel (vs. 17).

Solomon's emphasis on considering the consequences is still appropriate for us today. Many forbidden things may seem sweet at first but turn bitter in the end. For example,

sex outside of marriage may bring temporary pleasure, but is the possibility of an unplanned pregnancy, deadly disease, or ruined marriage worth the risk? Weighing the possible consequences against the short-term benefits is often motivation enough to say "No thanks" to the passing pleasures of sin.

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time I said no to a strong temptation?*

Solomon knew that no one person, no matter how wise, can consider all the possible consequences of an action. So he encouraged his readers to seek advice from others before making major decisions (vs. 18). Though he referred to waging war in this proverb, his advice applies to all aspects of life. Solomon's counsel in this proverb is a valuable reminder that wisdom means more than possessing knowledge. It is also knowing where to look for knowledge you do not already possess.

prising that he emphasized practical criteria to his readers concerning finding such a friend. One criterion for judgment is the way a person treats others who trust him or her. Solomon taught that if someone will not keep a secret for another person, it is foolish to believe he or she will keep a secret for you. Trusting a proven gossip with a confidence is foolish (vs. 19).

One example Solomon shared concerning God's ability and willingness to judge sin was in the case of persons who broke the fifth commandment about honoring one's father and mother. He warned his readers to always treat their parents with respect. The command to honor one's parents is the only one with a promise—the promise of a long, full life. In contrast, God's judgment on disrespectful children is often premature death (vs. 20).

An inheritance that is gained at a young age is often spent unwisely. Again, Solomon pointed to the futility of having riches if you don't have the wisdom to be a steward of them (vs. 21). Today some wise parents will not allow their children to inherit any money until they are at least 30 years old. Hopefully by the time they reach this age they will know what to do with a windfall.

Throughout history people have asked why God sometimes allows good people to suffer and evil people to prosper. Solomon also dealt with this difficult question. Though he had to acknowledge that at times wicked people

C **Godly Discernment** **(20:19-30)**

**The human spirit is the lamp of the LORD
that sheds light on one's inmost being.**

—Proverbs 20:27

Finding trustworthy friends was an important issue to a powerful man such as Solomon. It is not sur-

Punishable by Death

The fifth commandment taught that all children, even in their adult years, must be respectful to their parents. During the time of Moses, severe disrespect of parents was to be punished by the public execution of stoning (Deut. 21:18-21).

Apparently, over time the practice of executing disrespectful children was discontinued, if not forgotten. King David certainly did not practice such punishment with his own disrespectful children such as Absalom.

do prosper, Solomon still believed that the corrupt will receive what is coming to them by the hand of God. Based on this belief, Solomon taught against retaliating against enemies. Instead, we are to entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly when we are wronged (vs. 22). Revenge belongs to the Lord. This teaching is repeated and amplified in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:44; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30).

Vengeful words, once spoken, often take on a life of their own. They have a way of blinding justice

and inflaming hatred. What might begin as a verbal reaction to the wicked act of one individual can quickly grow into the bitter hatred of an entire race or nation. Left unchecked, such a bitter attitude can escalate into violence on an unimaginable scale. Realizing this, Solomon urged his readers to leave justice in the hands of God.

Ask Yourself . . . *Who in my life is hard to forgive?*

Once again Solomon warned against deceptive practices in busi-

ness. To cheat someone in a business transaction will draw the Lord's wrath (Prov. 20:23).

Solomon knew that, at best, a person might fully understand the short-term results of his or her own actions. But only God can fully foresee the consequences of every person's actions and reactions (vs. 24). Even the greatest of people sometimes behave selfishly, are blind to the outcomes of their actions, and have little control over their environment. Under these circumstances, turning to a perfect God for guidance is the only wise thing to do.

Solomon strongly warned his readers not to hastily make promises, only to consider the implication of one's vows later (vs. 25). This is especially true of marriage vows. Thousands of people have rushed into marriage for all the wrong reasons, only to discover later that they did not make a thoughtful decision.

Earlier Solomon warned his readers against seeking revenge for an imagined wrong. He reminded his readers to leave justice in the hands of God. However, these warnings did not mean that the readers must wait for death or disaster to overtake an enemy before he or she can seek vindication. There is one other recourse available by which justice is dispensed. That avenue is the divinely appointed court. As judge, the king was an instrument of God's impartiality on earth. Such a king would correct injustice and punish the wicked (vs. 26).

Like everything else God has established, however, the judicial

system can be abused. In a litigation-happy culture like ours, people file lawsuits for some ridiculous reasons. Conducted appropriately, however, a human court can be used by God to mete out His justice. This truth was affirmed a thousand years later by the apostle Paul when he said, "[The governing authority] is God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:4b).

No one knows the human heart like God. By using the lamp of divine wisdom, a king could see beyond the outward events in a legal case. He could decipher the normally hidden inner motivations of both parties and make a righteous judgment. Solomon was renowned for his God-gifted abilities to see so deeply (see I Kings 3:28). Solomon also realized that judgments had to be tempered with compassion for his people. Such compassion encouraged loyalty and a stable government (Prov. 20:27, 28).

The contemporary attitude that says, "I'll be happy when . . ." or "I'd be happy if . . ." is not a new phenomenon. It was as common in Solomon's day as it is today. Solomon's proverb reminding young people to enjoy the particular blessings of their age is a response to such foolish envy (vs. 29). He called on the young to enjoy their boundless energy and the old to appreciate the wisdom that comes with a lifetime of experience. The final proverb in this chapter acknowledges the necessity of stern punishment to correct wicked behavior. Solomon

wanted his readers to understand that the purpose of physical punishment is correction and redemption (vs. 30). Not only does the appropriate punishment deter future crimes, but it might also initiate a positive change in attitude.

sayings through Proverbs 22:16. He repeated his warnings against being arrogant, lying, and cheating the poor. He encouraged his readers to work hard, rebuke mockers, give to the poor, and train children to follow God.

Proverbs 21:1—22:16 in Brief

Solomon continued his 375 wise

11

The Trappings of Wealth

Proverbs 22:17—24:34

Proverbs 22:17-29 in Brief

Proverbs 22:17—24:22 may not have been written by Solomon. We are only told that this section contains the “sayings of the wise” (Prov. 22:17). The wise sayings in Proverbs 22:17-29 warn the readers against exploiting the poor, having hot-tempered friends, co-signing for loans, and stealing land. Even though they may have not been written by Solomon, they reinforced his teachings to the young people of Israel. Many of the proverbs found in this section are similar to the Egyptian sayings of Amenemope.

a Deceptive Riches (23:1-8)

**Do not wear yourself out to get rich;
do not trust your own
cleverness.**

—Proverbs 23:4

The excessive desires for wealth and social status are not new vices

in human history. Such blemishes have existed since the birth of social classes and will continue until the end of the age. Apparently, the anonymous writers of “the sayings of the wise” (22:17) were in a position to closely study and evaluate the lives of many desperate social climbers. These sages’ detailed descriptions display an intimate knowledge of the subject.

The teachers’ report was originally intended for the education of 10th-century B.C. readers. Despite the passing of time, this study is both enlightening and relevant for us today. Though technology has changed a great deal over the centuries, human social needs are still the same. Most of us have a strong desire to be accepted by and belong to at least one social group. Many foolishly assume that belonging to a wealthy social group will bring greater happiness than being a part of a group that is not centered around money. Genuine love and acceptance, however, do not come with a price tag attached to them.

Ask Yourself . . . *What kinds of groups do I feel most comfortable in?*

This section of Proverbs was con-

Danger at the Peak

The sage reminded readers about the consuming and fleeting nature of wealth (Prov. 23:3, 4). The teacher probably wrote these proverbs during the peak of Israel's economic success under Solomon. During Solomon's reign, Israel experienced enormous growth in commerce. Such growth brought great wealth to many Israelite merchants. They would trade oil, grain, and wine for Phoenician cedar wood to supply Solomon's numerous building projects. They would trade nuts, honey, and olive oil with Egypt in exchange for gold, ivory, and other luxuries.

Thanks to Solomon's newly developed merchant fleet, traders were even able to purchase such products as fragrant woods, precious stones, peacocks, and monkeys from southern Arabia and other locations to resell later at a large profit.

While the money was flowing like water, the sage wrote about the deceptiveness of riches. Not surprisingly, Israel began to slip back into idolatrous habits during this period of prosperity.

cerned that people be constructive members of society. The training was designed to encourage this. First, the writer warned readers to practice caution in social affairs, especially if invited to dine with someone of a prominent social status. Such an invitation should be accepted with healthy skepticism. The sage told readers to be aware of their surroundings and practice appropriate table manners for the specific situation (23:1). Furthermore, he strongly warned readers against overeating. The figurative encouragement to put a knife to one's throat stresses the importance of self-restraint while dining in such settings (vs. 2).

The writer encouraged readers to practice a similar self-restraint in attitude. The teacher warned against being carried away by any blatant display of wealth that might be encountered. Instead, the guest is to look beyond the banquet's appearance and look for any ulterior motives that might be part of the invitation (vs. 3). Whether such motives existed or not, the teacher saw the flaunting of wealth as superficial and inherently deceptive.

The teacher's second warning was against making the attainment of material wealth a primary life goal. The sage knew that an exaggerated desire for wealth can ruin a person physically, emotionally, and spiritu-

ally. The teacher wanted readers to balance striving for material needs with other pursuits (vs. 4).

The pursuit of wealth is too elusive a goal for many people to attain. There is often a nagging "never enough" feeling that accompanies the race for riches. The writer warned that even if people should attain great riches, wealth has a habit of (figuratively) sprouting wings and flying away like an eagle (vs. 5). If a person's happiness is based on wealth, then any sense of joy will also fly away when the riches are gone.

Ask Yourself . . . *What does my check-book say about my priorities?*

The teacher's warning is relevant in our society today. We occasionally hear stories of people who have attained great wealth only to lose it a short time later. There are also stories about people who attained and held on to great fortunes but lived miserable and loveless lives. If we do not master our money, it will eventually master us.

The teacher's third warning was to not become entangled with a selfish, miserly person, no matter how wealthy he or she appears to be. The sage admonished readers not to eat with or accept any gifts from such a person. Stingy people are constantly thinking about the cost of entertaining, their guests, not about using the things God has provided to build relationships. They are forced to be dishonest with their guests just to maintain an appearance of decency. In the end, a tight-fisted person's

halfhearted gifts will just make his or her guests sick. They would have better spent their time with people who genuinely cared about them (vss. 6-8). Better to use things and love people than to love things and use people.



Wisdom's Discipline (23:9-18)

**Do not let your heart envy sinners,
but always be zealous for the
fear of the LORD.**

—Proverbs 23:17

Like Solomon, the sage taught that the attainment of wisdom and righteousness requires self-discipline and a willingness to learn from the correction of others. Even the most disciplined of seekers needs the input and correction of others, especially from people who are wiser and more experienced than themselves. Since a fool is unwilling and incapable of appreciating such correction, any attempt to teach him or her is a waste of time and effort (vs. 9).

In ancient times, boundary stones marked a person's property. Anyone who moved such a stone was essentially stealing land from his or her neighbor. The writer strongly cautioned his readers against such devious behavior. The sage especially warned against stealing from the fatherless, who would have no means of defending their land

against such encroachment. The teacher promised that God Himself would come to their defense and severely punish the thief. The term for "defender" is the same term for the guardian-redeemer, who protected the interests of his relatives (vss. 10, 11).

Ask Yourself . . . *Are the "boundaries" in my life properly marked? Has anyone recently tried to "move" them against my will?*

The teacher reminded readers that there are no shortcuts to knowledge. Knowledge can only be attained by actively seeking it and applying it once it is gained (vs. 12).

The sage believed that parental discipline is an essential element for instilling a thirst for knowledge in a child. The meaning of "the rod" of discipline (vs. 13) can be corporal punishment or discipline in a broader sense.

Correction is only a part of discipline, necessary when a child willfully does what he or she knows is wrong. If the child is simply making a mistake, apart from any willful defiance, then the child should be corrected gently and praised for his or her efforts. Correction should always be preceded by training and instruction so that the child knows the right things to do. Correction should never be carried out as a way for a parent to vent his or her anger. The goal of correction should always be redemptive, and it should be administered with love.

Ask Yourself . . . *How am I different today because of my parents' discipline?*

To the Rescue

The sage described God as the "defender" (Prov. 23:11) of the fatherless. The word for "defender" is translated "guardian-redeemer" in the Book of Ruth (Ruth 3:9, 12, 13; 4:1, 3, 6, 8, 14). In Bible times, the guardian-redeemer was someone who came to a relative's assistance in times of need.

The duties of the guardian-redeemer were varied. He was expected to provide an heir for a brother who had died (Deut. 25:5-10). He was supposed to buy back land that a poor relative had sold outside the family (Lev. 25:25-29). He was expected to buy back a relative who had been sold into slavery (Lev. 25:47-49). He was also expected to avenge the killing of a relative (Num. 35:19-21).

Ideally he was to be the nearest male relative (Lev. 25:25). However, if the nearest male relative refused to honor his obligation, other relatives were to fulfill the guardian-redeemer's role (Ruth 2:20).

If no guardian-redeemer was available, God Himself would step in, assume the role, and defend the powerless.

The writer of these proverbs felt that the appropriate discipline can save a child's soul from death (vs. 14). It is possible that the anonymous writer had served in King David's court or at least had heard about David's undisciplined sons. If the principles behind these proverbs were practiced by David, then the king's three sons Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah might have lived to a ripe old age. Instead they died violent deaths while they were still young. Compared to the consequences, a short period of unpleasant discipline does not seem so bad.

No matter what type of discipline is used, the teacher had one goal in mind. The sage wanted children to grow into productive, godly adults, full of wisdom and reverence for God. It is difficult to imagine a more noble goal for any teacher or parent. The term translated as "inmost being" (vs. 16) virtually meant "kidneys." By naming these internal organs, which at that time were believed to be the seat of emotions, the writer expressed the depth of joy felt when people spoke with wisdom instead of the foolish arrogance that comes from an undisciplined childhood (vss. 15, 16).

The teacher cautioned against envying people who ignore God and simply live their own lives. While their lifestyles might seem appealing, remaining zealous for God has far more lasting rewards. The writer encouraged appropriate zeal with a promise of a future full of success and hope (vss. 17, 18).

C Parents' Honor (23:19-28)

May your father and mother
rejoice;
may she who gave you birth
be joyful!

—Proverbs 23:25

People often interpret the fifth commandment in a negative way in that they think of honoring parents in terms of "do not show disrespect." While it is true that the negative aspect of this commandment should be considered, there are also many positive ways to show honor to one's parents. In this section, the writer made some suggestions on how to do this.

The teacher strongly encouraged readers to keep their hearts on the right path. To ensure this, the sage cautioned them to choose their friends wisely. The experienced teacher warned his readers that if they spent too much time with drunks and gluttons, they would probably fall into the same trap. Such behavior will in turn result in poverty (vss. 19-21). This behavior will dishonor not only the reader, but his or her family as well.

Instead, the sage encouraged readers to honor their parents by showing respect for their experience and thoughtfully considering their opinions. Honoring one's parents late in life as an adult is just as important as doing so when a child (vs. 22).

The teacher encouraged readers to pay any price for truth and then not to let it go once it is attained. In other words, the sage did not want his readers trading the wisdom, discipline, and understanding they had gained for the passing pleasures of those who ignored the will of God (vs. 23).

A great way to honor one's parents is to demonstrate the wisdom they have passed along to you in your own life. This will make a mother and father proud, even into old age (vss. 24, 25). Their efforts to raise godly children will be honored by the wise behavior of those children when they become adults.

The sage wrote that the wayward woman is like a narrow well. This historic photo c. 1910 is of the entrance to Jacob's Well in Samaria.



Ask Yourself . . . *What am I doing today that would make my parents proud?*

The teacher cautioned men against associating with prostitutes and unfaithful wives. Like Solomon, the wise teacher warned that chasing after such women will cause the reader's destruction (vss. 26-27; see 6:26). As a "deep pit," the prostitute represents a cavity from which escape is nearly impossible (23:27). This "pit" can also be an allusion to Sheol. As a "narrow well," the wayward wife represents a place that looks enticing but that can also easily entrap. Though such women might appear harmless, they are more dangerous than armed bandits. Any kind of relationship with them can corrupt a man's most significant relationships, especially if he is married (vs. 28).

d Wine's Dangers (23:29-35)

Who has woe? Who has sorrow?

Who has strife? Who has complaints?

Who has needless bruises?

Who has bloodshot eyes?

Those who linger over wine,
who go to sample bowls of
mixed wine.

—Proverbs 23:29, 30

Some suggest this entire section was originally an independent poem.

Whether this poem was written by the teacher or was merely borrowed as a lesson for readers is not known. Regardless of its source, the writer painted the plight of the drunkard in vivid terms that still apply today. By graphically describing the tortures of the alcoholic, the sage hoped to provide an extra incentive to readers not to over-indulge in strong drink.

The writer opened the poem by asking a series of questions intended to attract the reader's attention.

The writer wanted to know what kind of person is usually miserable, bitter, in physical pain, and appears ill. The unwitting readers might first have believed the teacher was speaking about the sick or the poor. The answer, however, is the drunkard! Whether rich or poor, educated or illiterate, abusers of alcohol are all on the same pathetic plane (vss. 29, 30).

The writer warned readers about wine's alluring qualities. At first it looks and tastes harmless. It even gives momentary pleasure to the one drinking (vs. 31). If a little feels so good, wouldn't more feel better yet? No. In fact, the writer warned that the unpleasant consequences of overindulgence will greatly surpass any temporary enjoyment the alcohol first offered. The writer boldly compared the consequences of alcoholism to the bite of a poisonous snake. Suffering and death are the only rewards the alcoholic can look forward to in a life controlled by this addiction (vs. 32).

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I dependent on any harmful thing?*

The writer graphically detailed the suffering of the person addicted to alcohol. The alcoholic will suffer great mental anguish and endure horrible hallucinations. The alcoholic's once sharp mind will become dull and uncertain (vs. 33). This person is broken physically. Often,

Solomon compared the drunkard to one who is tied to the rigging of a ship on the high seas.

Painting by Willem van de Velde the Younger



the alcoholic is even incapable of standing up. The person who is drunk feels like he or she is on a rolling ship in the middle of a storm (vs. 34). Though the alcoholic's body can be badly damaged in a brawl, the drunkenness will cover any physical pain. People who cannot detect pain often do great damage to their bodies because the proper warning signals are gone. The most significant destructive effects of leprosy, for example, are caused when damaged nerves can no longer feel pain.

When alcoholics eventually awake from their drunken stupor, their first thoughts are about their next drink. Many alcoholics need several drinks in the morning just to stop the violent shaking in their limbs. Once they reach a state of normalcy, they keep on drinking only to continue the cycle all over again (vs. 35).

By the power of the Holy Spirit, many alcoholics and other substance abusers have found deliverance from their addictions. The first step, however, is to admit the problem exists.

Ask Yourself . . . *How would I help an alcoholic friend?*

Proverbs 24 in Brief

Proverbs 24:1-22 carries on the sayings of the wise. The teacher warned his readers against envying the wealth and power of wicked people. The wise teacher also contrasted the true rewards of wisdom and foolishness. The teacher continued by rebuking scheming people for their evil plots. Because God knows the heart, a person cannot pretend to be ignorant of another person's sufferings.

Proverbs 24:23-34 contains a small compilation of proverbs called the "further sayings of the wise." The unknown compiler of these proverbs encouraged readers to pursue justice for all people, not just the wealthy. He also encouraged readers to be honest in all of their affairs. Like Solomon, this teacher applauded hard work and discouraged laziness and the seeking of vengeance.

12

Practical Matters

Proverbs 25—29

a Royal Wisdom (25:1-10)

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter;
to search out a matter is the glory of kings.

—Proverbs 25:2

The sayings recorded in Proverbs 25—29 are attributed to King Solomon. Apparently they were

from Solomon's collection of 3,000 proverbs. They were selected, compiled, and organized by a committee of scholars appointed by King Hezekiah (reigned 715-686 B.C.) for the purpose of reforming Israel (25:1). The names of the collectors and the criteria they used in selecting and organizing these specific proverbs are still a mystery. Apparently this compilation of Solomon's wisdom was organized at the same time as the restoration of King

Good King Hezekiah

Hezekiah succeeded his father, King Ahaz of Judah, at the age of 25. He reigned in Jerusalem for 29 years. Hezekiah was one of the few kings who led Judah closer to God instead of further away from Him. He cleansed the Jerusalem temple and rededicated it solely to the worship of God. Then he celebrated his famous 14-day Passover in the temple for the first time in decades.

Hezekiah revived the use of the psalms of David and Asaph in worship and selected a committee to compile a collection of Solomon's proverbs. He was also responsible for a water tunnel that he cut through rock to connect Jerusalem to a spring outside the city. God rewarded Hezekiah's faithfulness by delivering Jerusalem from the Assyrians. God also granted Hezekiah 15 extra years of life after healing him of a disease. King Hezekiah's story can be found in II Kings 18—20; II Chronicles 29—32; and Isaiah 36—39.

David's psalms (see II Chron. 29:30). If not for the great revival during Hezekiah's reign, many of David's psalms and this collection of Solomon's proverbs might have been lost forever.

The first of Solomon's proverbs Hezekiah's collectors recorded concerns the importance of the king to society. Though God is all-knowing, there are some matters that He has concealed from humanity. He has gifted some, especially godly kings, to uncover those mysteries and, presumably, to explain those mysteries to others. This would be especially important in judicial matters. Generally speaking, God gifts devout leaders with the ability and determination to understand more than the average person. Though Solomon did not elevate the king to divine status, he taught that the king's experience, wisdom, and knowledge were so great that common people would be unable to understand his ways. Implicit in that statement is perhaps a warning not to question the decisions of the king (Prov. 25:2, 3).

Many people today might consider Solomon's elevated opinion of the monarchy to be flagrant self-promotion. However, it must be remembered that in Solomon's time kings were the undisputed leaders of nations. There was no other form of government available to the people of Israel. It must also be remembered that no matter how much power the king possessed, in the early years of his reign Solomon was dependent upon God for his

wisdom and authority. The king was also expected to follow God's laws just like the common people. Most importantly, the king was held accountable by God for his actions.

Next, Solomon compared the purification of silver to the purification of the royal court. Just as dross is removed from silver to purify it, so deceitful advisers were to be removed from the king's presence to ensure that the counsel he received was not tainted. These verses balanced Solomon's earlier claims to the king's near infallibility. No matter how wise and gifted he might be, the king was still dependent upon his advisers for accurate information if he was to make wise decisions. Solomon concluded that a wise king with trustworthy advisers would be richly blessed with success by God (vss. 4, 5).

Ask Yourself . . . *Who is the first person I usually go to for advice?*

After establishing the king's wisdom and authority, Solomon warned his readers against self-aggrandizement, especially in a ruler's presence. Instead, Solomon suggested modesty before a king. He cautioned his readers to never take a place of honor at a royal feast. Instead, they were to take a place of less honor and allow the king to promote them if he wished (vss. 6, 7a). Perhaps Jesus had this proverb in mind when He spoke about a foolish man who claimed a place of honor at a wedding feast, only to be embarrassed when asked to move to a lesser position (see Luke 14:7-11).

Solomon's final teachings in this section deal with personal conflicts, especially the type that can eventually end up in court. First, Solomon warned his readers to slow down and speak privately with the party involved before appealing to the judicial system. Solomon realized that most conflicts result from misunderstandings and not from evil intentions. Clear communication could probably resolve most of these problems before they become serious. If this advice is ignored, however, the person bringing the case might end up humiliated—and left with a stack of legal bills. In addition, if a plaintiff uses information that was provided in confidence in order to strengthen his or her case, then the plaintiff might lose more than the argument. His or her reputation and integrity will be lost (Prov. 25:7b-10).

Jesus reflected Solomon's warnings when He talked about church discipline (see Matt. 18:15-17). Matters of conflict between believers should be handled privately before they are brought before the church for resolution. Failure to take this important first step could result in embarrassment and damaged reputations.

b The Good Neighbor (25:11-17)

**Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house—
too much of you, and they will
hate you.**

—Proverbs 25:17

After teaching his readers how to get along with royalty, Solomon broadened his lessons to cover relationships with others. He compared the ability to say the right words at the right time to fine art made of precious metals. Such a skill was greatly respected in the ancient

Solomon likened a reliable courier to the coolness of snow at harvest time. These are the snow-covered mountains of Lebanon.



Royal Couriers

Communication between nations was a slow process in biblical times. There were no telephones, Internet connections, or overnight delivery services available. Therefore, most kings had a company of couriers at their disposal. Usually couriers carried written messages, sealed with the royal insignia. But secret information was not written down for fear of the courier's capture. In those instances, the courier would be expected to memorize and deliver the message aloud.

The courier, usually a young man, had to travel long distances through all kinds of weather, often along dangerous travel routes. If he carried bad news, he probably anticipated the king's anger. Angry kings were known to torture or kill couriers who carried unwelcome news. Couriers who carried messages to hostile kingdoms were often believed to be spies and were closely guarded.

However, couriers were not always treated badly. When sent to friendly kings bearing good news the courier would often receive a lavish welcome. Regardless of the greeting they received, couriers were indispensable in the ancient world.

world. Many scholars believe the term translated "apples" (vs. 11) would more accurately be rendered "apricots" since apples in that region were of low quality.

Solomon had equally kind words to say about humble listening. This he compared to valuable jewelry (vs. 12). He admired the person who was willing to learn from criticism. The natural reaction to an uninvited critique is often a stubborn refusal to admit to an error. Solomon probably watched the way his father, David, responded to criticism, especially that given by wise counselors like the prophet Nathan. Though David was a man of war, he was never one to fly off the handle when criticized—even when Shimei threw rocks at him as the king was fleeing from Absalom's coup (see II Sam. 16:5-12).

Another valuable relationship skill is trustworthiness. Solomon compared having a trustworthy messenger to snow at harvest time. Since such a weather occurrence was rare in Israel, several explanations as to what Solomon meant have been offered by scholars. He could have been speaking of snow brought down from the mountains and preserved in the ground. Or he could have been speaking of a cool breeze from the snowcapped mountains on

a warm workday. Or it could have been a drink cooled by some snow. In any case, a trustworthy courier who could be relied upon to convey matters of national security to other places lifted a burden from the king (Prov. 25:13).

The opposite of a reliable messenger was a person who could not be trusted. In a land like Israel that was often on the verge of drought, nothing was as disappointing as dark clouds that gave no rain. Solomon held people who boasted about things they could not do with the same contempt as he held such clouds (vs. 14).

In contrast, the person who demonstrated steady perseverance could persuade a king. A gentle response could have a significant impact—so powerful, in fact, that Solomon compared a soft but well-spoken response to the breaking of a bone (vs. 15).

Ask Yourself . . . *Who do I know who is quiet but powerful?*

Self-control and moderation were virtues highly prized by Solomon. It is not surprising that he cautioned his readers to avoid overindulging their appetites. A similar modern day proverb might be "Too much of a good thing can be bad for you." Though Solomon used overeating as his example, the warning against overindulgence applies equally well to working, sleeping, shopping, talking—almost any daily human enterprise. Solomon applied this principle to overextending one's welcome. Benjamin Franklin once

said, "Fish and guests begin to stink after three days." Solomon warned that a friendship could be ruined by visiting too often (vss. 16, 17).



Difficult People (25:18-28)

**Like a broken tooth or a lame foot
is reliance on the unfaithful in
a time of trouble.**

—Proverbs 25:19

Solomon believed that education should be practical. He taught his readers how to succeed in ordinary living situations as well as in the political intrigue of the royal court. Solomon desired that his readers live an upright, ethical life that would glorify God.

Because Solomon wanted his readers to live righteously, he did not hesitate to express his disgust at the common evil behaviors of his day. He especially hated the practice of perjury in court. While serving as judge in the more serious civil cases, Solomon would have heard his share of trumped-up charges and accusations. The king compared a person who lied in court to the weapons of an armed bandit who ambushed innocent people (vs. 18). Such a comparison should be taken seriously in our "lawsuit-happy" society today.

Like his moral advice, Solomon's practical advice has stood the test of

time. His comparison of depending on an unreliable person with suffering from a toothache can be easily appreciated in any culture. Whether in Solomon's ancient kingdom or in the current day, the aggravation of promised assistance that is not delivered, especially during a crisis, is an experience that many people have in common (vs. 19).

Solomon realized that it is not enough for a person to just be careful about the content of what he or she says. People must also consider the timing of their words. Solomon warned his readers to respect a person's right to grieve over a loss. Solomon knew that well-meaning attempts to pull others out of their doldrums could often only deepen their sadness. He compared such attempts to taking away a person's coat in the cold and causing a frothy chemical reaction with vinegar and soda (vs. 20). While our attempts to cheer up a hurting friend may alleviate our own discomfort, it may only intensify his or her depression.

Some Christians can be notorious for carelessly quoting Scripture to people right after a tragedy. Telling a person who has just experienced a significant loss that "all things work together for good" will probably only add to his or her confusion. The best thing you can do for a grieving person is to be available to listen.

Ask Yourself . . . *What kind of behavior from friends was most comforting the last time I was grieving?*

Solomon taught his readers to be kind to their enemies centuries before the apostle Paul repeated this teaching to the early church (see Rom. 12:20). This teaching, along with the king's earlier warning against rejoicing over an enemy's suffering, raised the treatment of an adversary to a higher level than the norm of the day (see Prov. 24:17, 18). Solomon believed that such an act of kindness would ensure God's blessings on the gracious person and perhaps even bring one's enemies to the point of repentance (25:21, 22).

The act of heaping coals on a person's head sounds more like revenge than an act of kindness. In Bible times, however, this act had a different meaning. In Egypt, a person demonstrated repentance by carrying a pan of burning charcoals on his or her head. In Israel, everything that could be carried through the streets was usually carried upon the head, even burning coals to be used for cooking and warmth. In this context, if a neighbor heaped coals of fire upon someone's head, that neighbor was providing a way to meet basic needs.

Solomon continued his practical advice throughout the rest of the chapter. He cautioned his readers not to be slippery and ambiguous in the way they communicated. The punishment for such behavior would be the distrust and even hatred of one's peers (vs. 23).

Solomon also cautioned his male readers not to choose a wife who was contentious. According to the king, it would be preferable to live

a poor man's existence than to share a home with an argumentative woman (vs. 24).

It was difficult in Solomon's time to stay in touch with friends who lived a long distance away. Often the only information that was received was tragic news about war, death, or illness. For that reason, Solomon compared receiving good news about friends to enjoying a cold drink of water—a treat in a hot,

arid land. Both were refreshing and rare (vs. 25).

Solomon's next parable also mentions water. However, this water had tragically become unfit for use. Such a tragedy was a powerful comparison to a once-righteous person who had turned away from God. Both the fallen person and the water that once had so much potential can now only bring illness and suffering (vs. 26). Only by God's miraculous

A TAXING SITUATION

Many of Solomon's proverbs warned against placing unnecessary burdens upon people (Prov. 25:17, 20, 24). Throughout his reign, however, Solomon did not take his own advice in this matter. Though Solomon's extravagant building program and lifestyle did much to impress neighboring nations, it also placed an excessive tax burden on the people of Israel.

Solomon demanded heavy taxes from everyone and developed a system to ensure the taxes were collected.

He divided his kingdom into 12 districts (with Judah exempted) and collected from each district on its assigned month of the year. Olive growers gave olive oil, herders gave sheep and goats, farmers gave grain and straw. People who lived in cities paid in weights of silver. Solomon also taxed the people's time by demanding that every Israelite man labor for the king one month out of every three. Considering the high taxes imposed on Israel, it is not surprising that after Solomon's death the people begged Rehoboam to reduce their tax burden.

intervention can either be made pure again. Solomon was a prime example of the truth of this proverb. After being a source of refreshment for his people, he eventually fell away from his first love for God and became a source of sorrow instead.

Solomon used the last two proverbs in this chapter to encourage his readers to practice self-control in all aspects of life. He taught physical restraint in regard to overeating. He encouraged social restraint in his warning against being a social climber. Finally, he encouraged emotional restraint in comparing a person who lacked self-control to a city with broken-down walls. Solomon wanted his readers to know that security and success rested on a person's ability to practice self-control in all aspects of life (vss. 27, 28).

Proverbs 26—29 in Brief

The remainder of Solomon's proverbs compiled by Hezekiah's committee cover a variety of subjects. A number of the proverbs provide exaggerated, descriptive snapshots of foolish personalities. Solomon

described the shortcomings of such foolish persons as the sluggard, the quarreler, and the schemer. His caricatures warn his readers against associating with such people and encourage them not to behave in a similar manner.

As in the earlier collection of his parables, Solomon praised humility, self-control, honesty, and a teachable spirit. He warned his readers not to oppress the poor, loan money at an exorbitant interest, close their eyes to danger, or marry quarrelsome people. He also stressed the importance of developing healthy friendships. Solomon taught that such friendships would sharpen his readers mentally and morally, and grant them greater security during life's difficulties.

Solomon also stressed the importance of fearing God. God created all of humankind, rich and poor. He gave the law and He alone fairly dispensed justice. Only by seeking Him could people understand real justice. Only by trusting God can people prosper. Only by fearing God is wisdom gained. Only by serving God will a country find stability.

13

The Wisdom of God's Creation

Proverbs 30—31

a Human Limitations (30:1-9)

Keep falsehood and lies far from
me;
give me neither poverty nor
riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
—Proverbs 30:8

Though Solomon wrote a majority of the Book of Proverbs, he was not the book's sole contributor. The final two chapters of the book were written by individuals other than Solomon. These chapters were added to the Book of Proverbs by an anonymous editor and serve as a type of appendix to the book. Though the dating of these final chapters is unknown, the wisdom they express has been appreciated throughout the centuries.

Scripture mentions wise men of lesser renown than Solomon, such as Ethan, Heman, Calcol, and Darda (see I Kings 4:31). Apparently, Agur, son of Jakeh, can also be included in this group (Prov. 30:1). Ithiel and Ucal could have been other sages, or perhaps Agur's teachers or students. Due to a lack of historical documen-

tation, nothing else about Agur can be said with certainty. However, many scholars believe Agur was not an Israelite. Many scholars associate him with the Ishmaelites.

One of the characteristics of wisdom is knowing how little you know. Agur was wise enough and humble enough to acknowledge the depth of his ignorance before God (vss. 2, 3). In confessing his shortcomings, perhaps he hoped to caution his readers against the folly of intellectual snobbery. Agur wanted his readers to know that true knowledge and wisdom produce humility before God and others. Arrogance, on the other hand, is merely a sign of unacknowledged ignorance.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I aware of how much I don't know?*

Agur expressed his frustration with people who assume they know the breadth and depth of God's mind. He asked rhetorical questions that challenge the credibility of such claims. Have they traveled above the clouds? Can they control the weather? Did they separate the oceans from dry land? Obviously, only God can do such things. Agur wanted to know who this might be,

probably to set him or her straight (vs. 4).

Agur's questions reflect the Lord's interrogation of Job (see Job 38—41). In both instances, the point seems to be the same. While there is much that God has revealed about Himself to humanity, there is much that has not been revealed. Along these lines Moses wrote, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God,



Agur described the Lord as a shield for those who take refuge in Him (Prov. 30:5). This is a Roman legionary shield.

but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). To claim to know the full mind of God is utter foolishness.

Agur was certain that though he would never know all the answers,

his faith in God would guide and protect him. His relationship with God was not based on his own limited abilities, but on God's unlimited power. His part was merely to trust God's flawless wisdom, power, and love and not his own strength or intellect. Agur cautioned his readers against adding anything to God's revealed will and calling it divine. If a teacher did, God would publicly shame that person for his or her presumption (Prov. 30:5, 6). The apostle John gave a similar warning in the Book of Revelation, "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll" (Rev. 22:18).

Agur often used numerical lists in his proverbs. Such lists made the proverbs easier for readers to memorize. His first numerical proverb is in the form of a short teaching prayer. In it he asked the Lord for two favors. First, he wanted God to protect him from dishonesty. Second, he requested that God supply him with enough, but only enough, material wealth to meet his daily needs (Prov. 30:7-8).

Agur used the remainder of the prayer to explain the second request. He was concerned that if he became too wealthy, he might allow his financial security to distract him from his reliance on God. He was equally concerned that if he became poor, he might be tempted to steal. Either way, his relationship with God would be strained and his actions would dishonor the Lord

(vs. 9). In teaching his readers this prayer, Agur encouraged his readers to depend on God and showed them that rich and poor must diligently guard their faith.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I content with what God has provided for me?*



Vicious People (30:10-17)

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.
—Proverbs 30:11-14

Agur warned his readers against falsely accusing a servant, especially to his or her employer. Perhaps Agur had heard about people blaming slaves for crimes they had committed themselves. Or perhaps he recalled how Potiphar's wife had sinned against Joseph in a similar fashion (see Gen. 39:17, 18). Agur cautioned his readers that the false accuser will pay (Prov. 30:10).

If we ever have a problem with an employee in a store or restaurant, we should humbly confront the person before approaching his or her supervisor. As in all disputes, we should first talk privately with the one who is causing the problem. By

The Rights of Slaves

Agur condemned the false accusation of slaves (Prov. 30:10). Though an Israelite's foreign slave was considered property, the law did not disregard the fact that he or she was also a human being. Though an owner could legally beat his slave, if the beating resulted in maiming, the slave was to be set free (Exod. 21:26, 27). If the beating caused death, the master was punished (vss. 20, 21).

The slave was also allowed the same Sabbath day rest and participation in the same religious festivals as his or her master (12:44.) It was understood that God would punish any owner who treated a slave unjustly (Job 31:13, 14). A slave also was allowed to inherit his master's property (Gen. 15:2, 3) and could be admitted into the family (1 Chron. 2:34, 35). The writer of Job appreciated his slaves' humanity to the point of acknowledging that God created both them and him (Job 31:13-15).

not involving a manager right away, we might not only resolve the problem but also gain the appreciation of the employee.

Ask Yourself . . . *What is usually my first response when a clerk is rude to me?*

Agur described four evil behavior patterns he had observed among people. Though he did not comment on these actions, it was obvious he was disturbed by them.

The first of these was a show of blatant disrespect of parents. Apparently Agur observed insolent behavior that went to the point of openly cursing parents (vs. 11).

The second ugly attitude was self-righteousness, which Agur defined as rationalizing away sinful actions instead of confessing them (vs. 12).

The third evil behavior pattern Agur described was the mannerisms and actions that accompanied arrogance. Perhaps Agur observed some people show open contempt for those they didn't consider to be their social equals (vs. 13).

Lastly, Agur hated to see people resort to verbal violence. Agur appropriately described their mouths as sharpened weapons. These brutal people were ravenous beasts, saying whatever they wanted and devouring any who were unable to defend themselves. This kind of predatory behavior would have been the natural next step for those who showed contempt for parents and others (vs. 14).

Next, Agur warned his readers about greed. He compared a greedy

person to leeches. Like leeches, covetous people shamelessly steal from others. Yet no matter how much they take, they are never satisfied. They must steal more (vs. 15).

Agur followed up his warning about greed with another numerical parable. In this parable, he compared the greedy person to four things: death, a childless woman, the desert, and fire. All four are stark symbols of emptiness. Like the greedy person, none will ever experience satisfaction or peace (vs. 16).

Agur closed his warning against the contemptuous treatment of parents by graphically describing the consequences. The eyes that mocked and scorned a mother and father will be plucked out by ravens and eaten by vultures. In other words, these scoffers may die young and perhaps not even be given a proper burial. They will be treated in death with the same contempt they gave their parents in life (vs. 17).

Perhaps Agur hoped that the fear of such a horrible death might discourage children from treating their moms and dads poorly and might encourage parents to appropriately discipline their children. The writer of Hebrews said, "We have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it" (Heb. 12:9). When discipline is absent, contempt runs rampant.

Ask Yourself . . . *How did the way my parents disciplined me affect my respect for them?*

C Amazing Things (30:18-23)

There are three things that are too
amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:
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
young woman.
—Proverbs 30:18, 19

Despite Agur's elder status, he proclaimed a child's wonderment concerning the works of people and nature. Many people today still share his admiration. He was amazed by the eagle's ability to fly while barely flapping its wings. He was astonished by the ability of the snake to move so quickly without the use of legs. The capability of a ship to float while heavy with cargo and even the way a man acts around a young woman amused and amazed Agur as well (vss. 18, 19).

It is difficult to determine what these four things have in common. They are all introduced by "the way," which can be translated "course of action" or "bent."

All four things carry an element of mystery. Perhaps the first three build up to the fourth—the mystery of romantic love. Even in our highly technical, scientific age, we can still join Agur's amazement while observing some of life's wonders. Perhaps all we have to do is slow

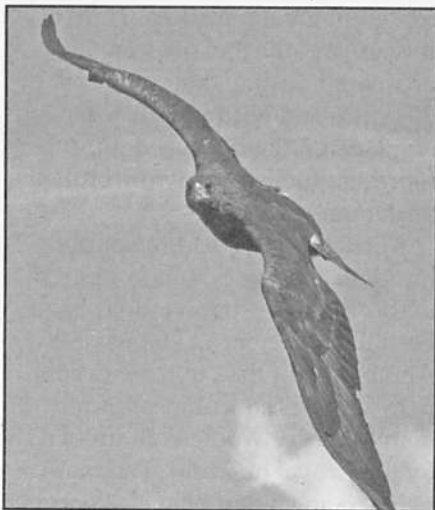
down enough to carefully observe these things.

Ask Yourself . . . *What was the most amazing natural occurrence I've ever witnessed?*

Another thing that amazed Agur was nothing like his earlier four examples. This wonder was much more serious. Agur could not understand how an adulterous woman could apparently not feel guilty for her unfaithfulness (vs. 20).

Many people feel adultery is justified if they are unhappy in their marriages. Often the affair will meet some emotional need that is being neglected or ignored by the spouse. Because this need is being met in the affair, unfaithful spouses often rationalize their indiscretions. Many even go so far as to think

Agur said that he was amazed by the apparently effortless flight of the eagle.



God approves of their double lives because all of their needs are being met. Nothing could be further from the truth.

This statement against sin without remorse is not limited to adultery. It applies equally to lying, stealing, murder, and all other sinful behaviors as well. To sin against God and others yet feel no remorse is difficult for many people to understand.

As well as being amazed by the unexplainable, Agur admitted that at times he was also repelled by it. He listed four amazing occurrences that he considered to be unbearable. They were servants who became kings, fools who prospered, married women who were unloved by their husbands, and female servants who were treated better than the wife of the household (vss. 21-23).

Agur's disgust for these occurrences should not be mistaken as bigotry or sour grapes on his part. Instead, his anger stemmed from the fact that all of these examples represent great injustices. The servant and the fool presumably prospered despite their own lack of diligence and wisdom. The unloved woman and the displaced wife represent foolish behaviors of their husbands.

Agur may have had the opportunity to observe Solomon's harem in this regard. What would it have been like to be one of 700 wives? And on top of that, to have to compete with 300 concubines? Surely many of those women felt unloved by their royal husband. The prestige of being a part of such a harem

probably did not begin to make up for the emotional emptiness many of these women had to endure.

To Agur, these injustices may have seemed to mock the teachings of the wisdom school. Though the teachers of wisdom admitted that there were occasional exceptions to their rules for success, they were still embarrassed and angered when these exceptions occurred.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I know someone who is succeeding at the expense of others?*



Examples from Nature (30:24-33)

**There are three things that are
stately in their stride,
four that move with stately
bearing:
a lion, mighty among beasts,
who retreats before nothing;
a strutting rooster, a he-goat,
and a king secure against revolt.**

—Proverbs 30:29-31

Like Solomon, Agur used examples from nature to teach his readers the ways of wisdom. He used examples such as ants, badgers, locusts, and lizards to teach and encourage proper behavior. He also used examples such as lions, roosters, and male goats to inspire his readers and remind them of God's awesome power. Even today, closely observing the ways of nature can lead us

A Lion in the Streets

Agur described the lion as a mighty beast (Prov. 30:30). The king of beasts is mentioned over 100 times in the Bible. Hebrew has at least seven words for lion and young lion. Though, for the most part, they no longer exist in Israel, large numbers of lions freely roamed throughout the promised land in ancient times. Most of these lions were of Persian descent. The males had heavy manes that went down to the shoulders and covered most of the belly. The Persian lion is nocturnal and does most of its hunting at dusk.

Lion hunting was a popular sport with Assyrian kings. Samson killed one with his bare hands, and David defended his flocks from them (Judg. 14:5, 6; 1 Sam. 17:34, 35).

Though used once by Peter as a description of Satan (1 Pet. 5:8), the lion was usually used by biblical writers as a metaphor of strength. Because of the lion's regal bearing, Christ was aptly described as the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5).

into worship of the Creator.

Agur challenged his readers to learn wisdom from four small animals, who, despite their size, proved to be successful in nature. He praised ants for their wisdom in storing up provisions. He praised hyraxes (small badgerlike mammals) for their ability to find shelter in inhospitable locations. Agur praised the locusts for their willingness to work together in such a devastatingly efficient manner. He closed this numerical proverb by praising the lizard for its boldness (vss. 24-28).

Ask Yourself . . . *What lesson have I learned recently from nature?*

After praising some small and relatively weak creatures in nature, Agur celebrated animals of more stately bearing. He praised the lion for its great strength and courage. By its very presence it demanded respect. Agur praised the rooster and even the male goat, which strutted in such a way as to command attention. Finally, Agur praised the regal bearing of the king. Like the animals mentioned before him, a king secure against revolt exudes strength, courage, self-confidence, and the God-given ability to lead people (vss. 29-31).

Agur taught his readers that true leadership ability is God-given. Such authority and power should not be usurped or faked. So Agur warned any fools who were planning on exalting themselves to put an immediate stop to their plans. Just as surely as churning milk produces butter,

and a punch to the nose produces blood, so the fool who gets people angry will only create strife for himself or herself. Hatred, violence, and suffering will be the inescapable result (vss. 32, 33).

Nature provides a vast resource of examples to follow—both good and bad. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can imitate many things that are strong, wise, and good in God's creation.

Proverbs 31 in Brief


The remainder of the Book of Proverbs was written by an unknown king named Lemuel. Lemuel was probably not an Israelite, but we have no idea what country he was from or the time in which he lived.

In the first part of this chapter, Lemuel's mother cautioned the king about the dangers of alcoholism. Leaders, such as the king, should never be a slave to strong drink because they will not make their decisions logically and rationally as they should.

The second section of the chapter is an acrostic poem that describes and praises the good wife. This particular poem begins each line with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This particular wife has servants to manage, money to invest, and business deals to negotiate. She is described as being organized, industrious, and successful. She is sturdy enough to withstand hard times and yet tender to the poor. Blessed are the husband and children who have this type of wife and mother in their home.

Milestones in the Life of Solomon

(990-930 B.C.)

- 
- Born of David and Bathsheba
 - Raised in the royal court
 - Appointed by David to succeed him as king
 - Challenged by Adonijah for the throne
 - Ordered the executions of Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei
 - Asked for and received wisdom from God
 - Visited by the queen of Sheba
 - Built and dedicated the temple
 - Wrote the Book of Proverbs
 - Accumulated a harem of over 1,000 women
 - Wrote the Song of Songs
 - Began to drift into idolatry
 - Was told the kingdom would divide
 - Wrote Ecclesiastes
 - Succeeded by Rehoboam upon death

The Forms of Wisdom Teaching

The Book of Proverbs uses a variety of styles to communicate practical truths for living godly lives. Here are some of the primary teaching devices seen in this book.

Proverb

Usually a short, pithy saying that conveys an ethical or practical truth

The wise woman builds her house,
but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.
—Proverbs 14:1

Admonition

An encouragement or warning

Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.
—Proverbs 16:3

Numerical saying

Makes use of a numerical pattern to relate a list of items that have something in common

Four things on earth are small,
yet they are extremely wise:
Ants are creatures of little strength,
yet they store up their food in the summer;
coney are creatures of little power,
yet they make their home in the crags;
locusts have no king,
yet they advance together in ranks;
a lizard can be caught with the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces.

—Proverbs 30:24-28

Better saying

Follows the pattern "A" is better than "B"

Better a little with the fear of the Lord
than great wealth with turmoil.
Better a meal of vegetables where there is love
than a fattened calf with hatred.

—Proverbs 15:16-17

Rhetorical question

A question with an obvious answer, intended to get the reader thinking

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!

—Proverbs 30:4

Wisdom poem

Wisdom poems or songs with an ethical lesson

The Good Wife

A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.

—Proverbs 31:10-31

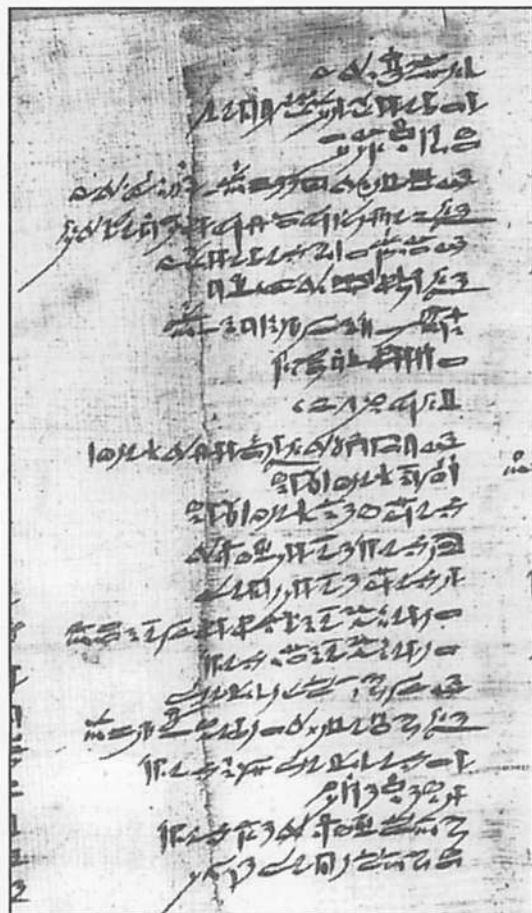
Example story

Anecdote used to make a point

The Simpleton and the Adulteress

I saw among the simple,
I noticed among the young men,
a youth who lacked judgment.
He was going down the street near her corner,
walking along in the direction of her house . . .

—Proverbs 7:6-27



There are many parallels between Proverbs and other ancient wisdom literature, especially the "Instruction of Amenemope" from Egypt which was written around the same time period. A portion of "The Wisdom of Amenemope" is found on this papyrus from Thebes, Egypt, which dates from around 1000 B.C.

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