# 1 Proverbs 1

This book presents sayings of wisdom, from sages: an ancient tradition of teaching that supplements the Torah and prophets (see Jeremiah 18:18). The proverbs are poetic, and should be read accordingly. Proverbs are extremely compact statements, to be read slowly, repeatedly, with deep meditation. They are not to be treated as commandments or as promises, but as counsel, requiring us to search their full depth of meaning in order to know where and how they are to be applied. The book is composed and structured to serve as systematic instruction for children and for future leaders, organized as below:

I. Praise of wisdom, from a father (1:8 – 9:18)

II. Proverbs of Solomon – instructions for youth (10:1-22:16)

III. Words of Wise Men (22:17 – 24:34)

IV. Hezekiah’s collection – leadership training (25:1-29:27)

V. Words of Agur (30:1-33)

VI. Words of King Lemuel (31:1-9)

VII. The Excellent Wife (31:10-31)

Basic definitions

Wisdom: skills for living, both social skills and for serving the Lord

Knowledge: Includes experiential knowledge as well as intellectual. It thus includes personal relational knowledge of God, and knowledge of life experience.

The “simple” or “naïve”: basically means open-minded, therefore uncommitted, morally adrift (1:32), and easily misled (14:15). It is normally expected for youth, but too often continues in later life as a refusal to commit to higher values, meaning or purpose.

The “fool”: despises wisdom (1:7), refusing to listen. This attitude makes it difficult to instruct or train the fool (17:10; 18:2; 23:9; 26:4,5; 29:9).

The scoffer: disparages wisdom, is actively hostile, and therefore unable to receive instruction (9:7-8; 13:1; 15:12)

Fear the Lord: in humility, take the Lord seriously, listen respectfully and attentively, trust His promises and heed His warnings (3:5-8; 8:13; 14:2; 15:31-33; 28:14).

The prologue (1:1-7) has a chiastic structure, with its center point in verse 4: “*to give prudence, …knowledge and discretion*”. This is the final purpose of the Proverbs. This is accomplished when one receives instruction (verse 3) and when a wise man hears and acquires wise counsel (verse 5). These are the moral objectives. This, in turn, is supported by a mental objective: training to be able to discern and understand such sayings (1:2,6). One learns how to read and learn from proverbs by reading and studying this book. The prologue concludes with verse 7, which states the foundation and basis for acquiring wisdom and knowledge:

 *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge”*.

To honor God, to have the attitude of humble submission to Him, is the first and controlling principle for obtaining knowledge, understanding and wisdom*.* This is a central theme of the wisdom literature of the Bible. The pursuit of true knowledge must be faith-based. This is what Anselm of Canterbury said theology should be: “faith seeking understanding”. Without faith there can be no understanding.

The next section, versus 8-19, is an exhortation to hear and accept the instruction:

“*Hear, my son, your father’s instruction*

*And do not forsake your mother’s teaching;*

*Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head*

*And ornaments about your neck*” - Proverbs 1:8,9

The first two lines are an example of parallelism – the second line repeating the thought of the first line, in a different manner. The teachings are ultimately from God, but they are passed on to the children through the parents. If the child learns the lessons, and obeys, he will be honored, as the social skills of wisdom will make him attractive and respectable. The remainder of this section is a warning against the contrasting walk: submitting to the enticements of sinners. Their path is the way to self-destruction, which is a recurring theme in the Proverbs:

 *“So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence;*

*It takes away the life of its possessors”* - Proverbs 1:19

This is the same idea as in Jesus’ statement: *“All those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword”* (Matthew 26:52).

The final section of the first chapter, verses 20-33, is a calling and a warning:

*“Wisdom shouts in the street,*

*She lifts her voice in the square;”* - Proverbs 1:20

She calls out loudly and publicly, for all to hear, appealing to the simple (naïve), to the fools, and to the scoffers. They have been warned, and are therefore without excuse.

*“Because they hated knowledge*

*And did not choose the fear of the Lord.*

*They would not accept my counsel,*

*They spurned all my reproof.*

*So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way*

*And be satiated with their own devices.”* - Proverbs 1:29-31

This is the same kind of argument as Paul makes in Romans 1:18-20. Their failing is not from lack of instruction and counsel, but from deliberately refusing to receive it, and that primarily because they did not choose to fear the Lord. And their judgment is not arbitrary, it is exactly what they have chosen.

This first chapter thus defines the purpose and sets the major themes of the book. These proverbs offer wisdom. For those who accept it, by the fear of the Lord, there will be blessing and life. For those who choose to reject it, there will be destruction and death. These Proverbs are to be taken seriously.

# 2 Proverbs – Chapters 2 and 3

Chapters 2-9 are instructions to prepare the reader for the actual collections of proverbs (in chapters 10-30). It tells us how to achieve the purposes given in chapter 1. The pre-conditions for instruction are given in 2:1-4. Wisdom is from God, but we are responsible for receiving, inclining, treasuring, seeking and searching. These are things that we must do, which is consistent with the Arminian view of human freedom and responsibility.

What is required first (2:3) is to cry for discernment, which is equivalent to the plea in James 1:5 - if you lack wisdom, just ask (which is what Solomon had done, in 1 Kings 3:9). Note, however, that God does not usually give direct answers to all our specific questions. What is promised in the subsequent verses is the ability to properly think and to discern the answers. It is usually more important to teach “how-to-think” than “what-to-think”.

If the son meets the pre-conditions of 2:1-4, then he will be blessed with the consequences in 2:5-8 and 2:9-11. Verses 2:5-11 are arranged in the form of alternating parallelism:

 A - Religious Education - (vs 5) - fear of Lord, knowledge of God

 B - Substantiation - for God gives wisdom (vs 6, 7a);

 C – Promised security & protection (7b,8) - He will guard you (vs. 8)

 A’ - Ethical Education (vs. 9) - righteousness, justice, equity, good course

 B’ - Substantiation - (vs 10) for wisdom will enter your heart

 C’ – Promised security & protection - (vs. 11) - discretion will guard you

In 2:5, to “discern the fear of the Lord...” is an example of metonymy, where “the fear of the Lord” stands for the wisdom that arises from the fear of the Lord. So it means to discern wisdom. Knowledge of God could be either knowing God Himself or the knowledge He gives about everything else. The context (2:6, 9) suggests the latter. Associating verse 5 with verse 9 shows that wisdom and righteousness are co-referential, meaning they must go together and work together. Wisdom (skill) without righteousness will achieve the wrong results. Righteousness without wisdom will fail to achieve the right results.

The promise in 2:7, that the Lord is a shield to those who walk in integrity, indicates that we must walk according to our inner convictions, according to conscience. If we do this, then He will guard the path and preserve the way. Even when our knowledge and hence conscience are faulty, He will provide the corrections that are needed to keep us on the true path; but we must first walk in integrity.

One of the most valuable promises is in 2:10. We will not only know this wisdom, but it will be written onto the heart (incorporated in our will), and it “will be pleasant to your soul”. He will make it delightful to us. Consider Psalm 37:4, and Jesus’ promise that the burden will be light (Matt 11:28-30). Righteousness will become a labor of love.

Verses 2:12-19 describe the evils that the son is to be protected from: evil men (2:12-15), and the strange woman (2:16-19). The evil man delights in evil and rejoices in his perversity. His paths are crooked, and he is devious. The strange woman (adulteress) is a flatterer and covenant breaker, whose end is death.

The chapter closes with a summary (2:20-22): “*So you will walk in the way of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous.*” This is because the son, if he is upright, “will live in the land”. This means the promised land, which for Israel was the foundational promise of the covenant, essential to their very existence as a people, and essential for fellowship with God. Walking in integrity will keep him in contact with God (in the land), by which God will keep him on the straight path. But the wicked and devious have cut themselves off from God, and hence go astray.

In chapter 3, the son is reminded once more to “not forget my teaching”. Similar exhortations and promises are made here as in chapter 2, but here the issue is not the initial acquisition of wisdom, but keeping and retaining wisdom. The exhortation is to not depart. The promises include peace (*shalom*, 3:2), which is more than absence of violence and turmoil, it includes all the positive blessings of a harmonious life. The kindness (*hessed,* 3:3) that is enjoined pertains to helping the helpless and being loyal. A good example is in Ruth 3:10, where Boaz compliments Ruth for her *hessed*. Such kindness is an element of righteousness, which is the necessary companion to wisdom.

Verses 5-10 are exhortations with attached promises, beginning with the following:

 *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart*

*and do not lean on your own understanding.*

*In all your ways acknowledge Him,*

*and He will make your paths straight.”* (3:5-6)

It is probably better to translate verse 3:6 as “*In all your ways know Him...*”, which is a way of saying that we should walk in harmony with Him. This is followed by other exhortations and associated promises:

*“Fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones”* (vs 8).

*“Honor the Lord from your wealth...so your barns will be filled with plenty...”* (vs 9).

These are often quoted, and often misinterpreted as support for a wealth and health gospel. But, in fact, these promised blessings are often not fulfilled, as clearly shown in Job & Ecclesiastes. Why do these proverbs seem to contradict other scriptures as well as universal experience? Do the Proverbs promise too much? Some of the explanations that are often heard:

 - all suffering is due to sin; no one is perfect

 - the “sage” is confused or mistaken

 - these are probabilities, not promises

The first of these options is refuted in Job; the second and third compromise the authority of scripture. A better answer is that we need to read the Proverbs holistically, not just each epigram in isolation. The real truth is found in the whole truth, which is found by coherently integrating all the proverbs. What this leads to is an eschatological perspective: that the blessings are primarily beyond this life, in the next age (23:18;24:20; 12:28; 14:32). Proverbs speaks of a cosmic justice that is fully realized only in the Kingdom of God, yet to come. Consistent with this perspective, the word “blessed” (*ash-re*), which means “rewarding”, refers not to a present “happiness”, but to a future and eternal reward (consider the beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-12). There are two ways, however, in which the promised consequences are fulfilled in this age:

- corporately, in Adam: sharing the consequences of sin;

 - in Christ: spiritual participation in the kingdom

As an appropriate follow-up to the promised blessings, there is now (in 3:11-12) a comment about discipline and reproof:

*“do not reject the discipline of the Lord or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproves...”*

See Hebrews 12:4-11, which quotes these verses.

The value of wisdom to humanity is emphasized in 3:13-18. This passage begins and ends with blessed (*ash-re*), setting these six verses off as a section. It has a concentric structure:

A - (vs 13) – blessed is the man...

 B - (vs 14, 15) – profit and value of wisdom

 B’ - (vs. 16, 17, 18a) - what she offers, specifically

 A’ – (vs. 18b) – blessed are all...

This description of lady Wisdom holding long life in her right hand, and riches and honor in her left hand (3:16), is probably influenced by Egyptian mythology of *ma’at*, the goddess of justice and harmony, who was pictured as holding a scepter of rule and authority in her right hand, and the *ank*h, symbolizing life and immortality, in her left hand.

The next two verses, 3:19-20, make the point that the Lord created and sustains the heavens and the earth by this same wisdom. This theme is expanded in Proverbs 8:22-31. This is the supreme testimony to the value of wisdom. Then, in 3:21-26, the son is instructed to “not let them vanish from your sight”. It is assumed here that the son has acquired wisdom, but he is exhorted to keep her, to not let her go. The rewards are for those who persevere.

The final section of this chapter (3:27-35) gives a few proverbs, inserted as a preview of what is to come in the actual collections later in the book. The first proverb (3:27,28) encourages generosity; the second (3:29-31) warns against the way of violence. The concluding verses (3:32-35) speak of the consequences: blessing for the righteous, and a curse upon the wicked; honor for the wise, and dishonor for fools.

# 3 Proverbs – Chapters 4 and 5

Chapter 4 begins another section of instructions from the father. He appeals to his sons - probably meaning sons in successive generations - to hear his instruction and “give attention that you may know understanding”. To “hear” is to effectually hear, i.e. to hear in a way that leads to obedience. It is also an appeal to make the additional effort to gain “understanding”. This is insight - to see beneath the surface, to see through things, to see the back-story. It is in understanding or insight that one grasps a greater depth of meaning, by which the knowledge can be correctly applied. This is the fullness of “truth”.

In the next few verses (4-9) he repeats what he had been taught by his own father: “to hold fast my words, keep my commandments and live; Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!” This is repeated in 4:7: “the beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom; and though it cost all you have, get understanding.” The starting point and foundation is to make the decision and make the investment - a decisive commitment - to obtain wisdom and understanding. This acquiring is a purchase, paying a price to obtain it, which is an advance beyond earlier exhortations to search for and to find wisdom (2:4; 3:13). The son must also pay a price for it.

Beyond the effort and the paying a price, the sons are told to “love her, and she will watch over you” (4:6a), to “prize her, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her” (4:8). For wisdom to be useful, to receive her full rewards, she must not just be passively received, but actively sought, and purchased and prized and loved. You have to really desire wisdom in order for her to bear fruit. Wisdom is meant to transform us; and such transformation, which is essential to the rewards, can only take place to the extent that it is earnestly desired, a desire that is manifested by paying a price. A heart cannot be changed unless it wants to change.

This is the way with all of God’s gifts. It is the idea behind Jesus’ teachings on giving: that where your treasures are, there will your heart be also. This desire is expressed in the Psalms: “As the deer pants for water” (Psalm 42:1-2). It is also the desire one should have for the kingdom: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-46). This relationship with God is analogous to that of a marriage, where a solemn commitment is necessary to receive the full benefits of the relationship. The negative side of this principle is that where there is no desire or appreciation or commitment, then there can be no possibility of benefit. Since Esau despised his birthright (see Genesis 25:34; Hebrews 12:16), it would have been wasted on him. Even though Jacob’s character was highly flawed in many ways, he met the one foundational prerequisite: he really appreciated the value of the birthright. Similarly, wisdom teaching is wasted on scoffers, and so Proverbs 9:7-8 says: “do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you”. The same applies to the Gospel, as Jesus instructed His disciples: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” (Matthew 7:6)

This need for high valuation and desire, willingness to make full commitment and pay a high price, is perhaps the main point of the first 9 chapters of Proverbs. The father wishes to instill this earnest desire and encourage a decision for a costly commitment. This is the prerequisite for the wisdom in the following proverbs to have any transformative effect. Motivation is foundational and prerequisite to life-changing learning.

Verses 10-13 repeat the promises of long life for those who accept the sayings. As long as the son walks in the way of wisdom, his steps will not be impeded, (i.e. no blockages on the road), and he will not stumble. As long as we are on the right path, God enables us to make steady progress.

Versus 14-19 repeat the warnings against taking the wrong path - i.e. the path of the wicked. The wicked are perversely committed to evil. They lose sleep devising evil and ways to cause others to stumble (compare 1:10-19; 2:12-15; and see Micah 2:1). Stumbling is not something deliberate, it is not willful sin, but is rather something inflicted upon us as victims. However, it only happens if we have deliberately chosen to take the wrong path. It is because the wrong path is in darkness, and in the darkness, people stumble. We can relate this to acquiring understanding: light is understanding, darkness is lack of understanding.

The next section, 4:20-27, resumes and repeats the admonition to attend to the father’s words, to keep them in your heart “for they are life to those who find them and health to all their body”. As pointed out previously, life and health have a meaning that extends beyond this age. It looks to eternal life and the associated health of the entire soul. The most important point in this passage is 4:23 - “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” The heart is the seat of desire and will, and is thus the source and spring for all that we do. It is the desires and decisions of the heart that lead either to righteousness or to evil, to either life or death (compare Matt 15:17-20). The sense of “guarding” is probably not so much for protecting the heart as it is to keep the heart in line. Consider Philippians 4:8, how the peace of God “will guard your hearts and your minds…”.

This is then followed by instruction concerning the mouth (speech), which is to be truthful and straight-forward, avoiding deceit and deviousness. Many proverbs in the following chapters are about speech, and truthfulness is the dominant theme throughout. The eyes (where you look), are to be focused and directed upon the right destination; where you look determines where you will go (see Hebrews 12:2). Consider Jesus’ teaching about good eyes and bad eyes: “The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.” (Matthew 6:22-23). Finally, there is the path of your feet (action), which pertains to the specifics of actual behavior: step-by-step obedience. If the son is careful and watchful about all these things, his ways will be established.

Chapter 5 repeats and elaborates on the warnings against the adulteress. She tempts with smooth speech, but in the end is bitter wormwood (poison), “sharp as a two-edged sword” (dangerous and deadly). In contrast to the lady Wisdom, the adulteress leads one down the path to death, and those who go to her will waste their vigor and strength. Applying this to the more general level, forsaking the true God for false gods is a waste of one’s life and strength, leading to death. The conclusion (5:21-23) is a reminder that the Lord sees everything: “For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths” (5:21). Therefore, there will be consequences for evil: “His own iniquities will capture the wicked…” (5:22a)

# 4 Proverbs – Chapter 6

The first portion of this chapter, verses 1-19, consists of five proverbs that warn against various kinds of foolishness. The final section, verses 20-35, is another encouragement to live according to wisdom, and a warning to stay away from the adulteress.

The first proverb, 6:1-5, is a warning against providing surety - that is, being a guarantor for someone else’s debts. In today’s terminology, this would be co-signing for a loan. It is a dangerous snare; and if the son falls into it, he must do everything possible to escape. Generosity - to give or to lend to those who are in need - is commended throughout the Proverbs (e.g. 19:17; 28:27). But providing surety is a different matter. It places the guarantor in a position of obligation and risk - a commitment subject to situations beyond his control. He is at the mercy of the person whose debt is being guaranteed, and he has no way of knowing what his own future financial situation may be - whether he will be able to meet the obligation. This is foolishness (see Proverbs 11:15; 17:18; 22:26-27). The general principle here is to not assume obligations and risks that could restrict your power and freedom to serve the Lord. Another consideration is that providing surety is not really a favor to the debtor, in that it encourages or enables irresponsible borrowing and is a temptation to default.

The next proverb is concerned with another form of economic irresponsibility: laziness. It is addressed to “the sluggard”, not the son, but the son is to listen and learn from it. The counsel is to “*go to the ant… observe her ways and be wise*” (see also 30:25). This is referring to the harvester ant, a species that collects grain in the summer and stores it in their nest. The first remarkable thing is how these ants perform their work without any leader giving them direction - they all individually do the right thing, in a coordinated way. The second point is that they do this during the opportune time, well in advance of the need. They collect and store the grain during the summer, so that it will be available to sustain them through the winter. They show the wisdom of working and preparing while there is opportunity, seizing the moment, for the sake of the future. This is one of the main points about wisdom: looking to the future and preparing for it. The sluggard does not have this wisdom; he wants to sleep and rest during the harvest season (two months, for barley and wheat). He folds his arms, defiantly refusing the call to labor. The result, in the end, will be devastating poverty. At one level, this is certainly true in economics, but it also has other applications. Working now to obtain wisdom and understanding will have great benefits later in life. And all the work and sacrifices of love that we make throughout this life will be richly rewarded in the next life. The message at all these levels is to labor now, while there is opportunity, in preparation for the future. See also Ephesians 5:15-16.

The proverb in 6:12-15 is a description of the worthless person, and his destiny. He “walks with a perverse mouth”; that is, his way of life is to use speech for evil purposes. In verse 13, he “winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, points with his fingers”. This indicates he is conspiring to deceive and take advantage of someone. When you see a person doing these things, beware. The source of his perversity is his heart, in which he continually devises evil (see 4:16). The consequence is that he spreads strife, he destroys the peace (*shalom*) of the community. His destiny is therefore calamity, to be broken.

The next proverb is written in a form that is found several times in this book. “*There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him*”. The general formula is “there are x things…. even x+1 things…” This statement is then followed by x+1 phrases (things). It is a way of saying that these x+1 items make a complete list (especially if x+1=7). The last item in the list is usually a summary of the entire proverb, or the most important of all the items. The first five items in this list refer, again, to body parts. The haughty eyes display an attitude of false pride and superiority, of disdain and contempt for others. Such an attitude can often be seen in the eyes (see 30:13). The lying tongue seeks to use and manipulate others, showing no respect for them. And the deeds of the hands “shed innocent blood”. This can stand for any kind of violence: depriving others of justice and peace. The source, again, is the heart, where the wickedness originates. Feet that “run rapidly to do evil” indicate the eagerness to do evil, and also the habitual and instinctual nature of their evil deeds. They are accustomed, by habit, to do evil continually, without thinking. Item six then returns to a particularly malicious form of lying: to bear false witness. The list concludes with the final and most serious consequence of all these things: he spreads strife among brothers (compare 6:14). The book of proverbs consistently emphasizes strife as the consequence of evil. It is the opposite of peace (*shalom*).

Verses 20-23 introduce the next section with another admonition to the son to accept instruction from his father and mother. These teachings are to be bound onto his heart, and tied around his neck. They will thereby always be present, to guide him, watch over him and talk to him. They will be his light and his way of life. These same claims are made for the Torah (Psalms 119:8,105), and by Jesus Christ, for Himself (John 8:12; 9:5; 14:6).

This is then followed by warnings against the adulteress. The son must not be taken in by her smooth talk, her beauty, her eyes, or else he will pay a high price for his transgression. Verse 26 compares the price of an affair with an adulteress (his life), to the price of a prostitute (a loaf of bread). In 29:3, it is said “*he who keeps company with harlots wastes his wealth*”. This is foolishness, but it is not nearly as severe as what is said here about adultery. The cost of a harlot is money, the cost of an adulteress is life. Furthermore, the penalty is unavoidable. He who plays with fire will surely be burned (6:27-29). In verses 30-35, the punishment for adultery is compared to that of a thief. A thief is not despised if he steals due to hunger; restitution may require all his wealth, but the account can be settled with money. For an adulterer, however, the offended husband will never be satisfied - he will seek the utmost vengeance.

The integrity of the community and the nation was built upon the integrity of the family. This is why adultery was such a serious offense. By undermining the institution of the family, it undermines the solidarity and identity of the people at all levels of society. One who is faithless in the lesser things will also be faithless in the greater things (Luke 16:10). Adultery also destroys the moral authority of parents, and hence the vital chain of parent-to-child instruction. Unfaithfulness in the family is directly related to unfaithfulness of the nation. As was said in Proverbs 5:3-5, the way of adultery is the way of death.

# 5 Proverbs – Chapters 7-9

Chapter 7, verses 1-5, introduce another section with encouragement to the son: to treasure and keep “my commandments”. They are to be kept “as the apple of your eye” – literally, the pupil of the eye. We are instinctively very protective of the eye, and we should be just as protective of these teachings. Just as a guardian keeps (guards, watches over, protects) a person they are responsible for, the teachings are personified as one who needs to be protected from attack and violation. Just as Israel was charged to “keep” the words of the covenant, and our government officials today swear to “preserve, protect and defend the constitution…”, the son is charged to keep the commandments, as carefully as he protects the pupil of his eye. Our lives depend upon our faithful obedience to these commandments. Wisdom and understanding are to be loved and protected as one loves and protects a sister or a close friend. If the son does this, he too will be protected - especially, from the adulteress.

In 7:6-23, the father describes a scene he has observed. He sees a young man passing down the street, who is among the “naive” (uncommitted), and who lacks sense (literally “heart”). It is not that he lacks knowledge, but that he has not “taken it to heart”, he is weak-willed. He walks towards the house of an adulteress, in the darkness of night (7:6-9). He willfully exposes himself to temptation, and he does so in the darkness, for he knows it is not right (see John 3:19-20).

7:10-23 — A woman approaches him, dressed like a harlot, cunning, boisterous (loud) and rebellious. She seizes and kisses him – there is nothing subtle about her approach. She had made a peace offering, and therefore has meat from the sacrifice available for a meal. She invites him to a banquet, and to her bed (spread with fine linens, sprinkled with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon). She is offering him a luxurious feast, of food and “love”. Furthermore, she claims it is safe, because her husband is away on a long journey. With many persuasions and flattering lips (compare 5:3; 6:24)‚ she seduces him. So, he follows her, as an ox to the slaughter, not knowing that it will cost him his life (the cost previously defined in 5:4-5; 6:26). The chapter concludes with a call to listen, to “not let your heart turn aside to her ways”, for “*Her house is the way to Sheol, descending to the chambers of death*” (7:27).

The next section (8:1 - 9:6) presents the alternative: the call from “Wisdom”. She does not stalk the streets by night, but she lifts up her voice on the top of heights where the paths meet, and beside the gates of the city. She too makes an appeal to the naïve. but unlike the adulteress, she speaks truth and righteousness (8:6-9). Her instructions are more precious than silver, gold or jewels (8:10-11; and compare 3:14-15). She dwells with prudence, knowledge and discretion (8:12). The decisions of wisdom are based on thoughtful insight, and the fear of the Lord. Wisdom hates what the Lord hates: pride, arrogance, and the perverted mouth.

There is power in wisdom, the power by which kings rule (8:12-13). It is the power to rule and to judge rightly, with justice. This is what Solomon had prayed for at the beginning of his reign (1 Kings 3:9). This is true power, in that it wins the respect and willing obedience of the people; and in the long term, truth and justice accomplish their purpose. In verses 17-21, Wisdom says again that what she offers, the ability to walk in righteousness and to dispense justice, is true wealth, better than silver and gold.

The next section (8:22-31) speaks of Wisdom’s role in creation. The Lord “possessed” her from the beginning. The word translated as “possessed” has the normal meaning of “to acquire”. But it is a mistake to think of God as “acquiring” anything from outside Himself. The better interpretation would be in accordance with 8:24, where it says that Wisdom was “brought forth”, or “born”. The same word was used in this sense in Genesis 4:1, where Eve says “I have brought forth a man” (i.e. the birth of Cain). So, the meaning is that before creation, before time, Wisdom was born, or begotten, from God, to serve as His agent in creation. She was with Him in all the events of creation, “rejoicing in the world, His earth, and having my delight in the sons of men” (8:31). See Job 28:23-27 for a similar description of Wisdom as the agent of creation. This is nearly the same as what John said about the Word (Logos) in John 1:1-5. In fact, there is a near equivalence between Wisdom and Torah and Logos. The claims made in the Old Testament about Wisdom and Torah - to be the way, truth, life, and light - are fulfilled in the Logos, who became flesh, in Jesus Christ. He “*became to us wisdom from God …..*” (1 Corinthians 1:30). This eternally begotten Wisdom is the partial representation of the only begotten Son of God.

 “*Now therefore, O sons, listen to me…*” (8:32). Since all of creation is the work of Wisdom, one does well to listen to her. She knows how the creation works, and she is therefore able to give counsel that leads to life. Another conclusion we can draw, is that Wisdom has left her mark upon nature, such that we can learn wisdom from nature. This is the basis of natural theology. This is why Paul could say that God’s “*eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen ... through what has been made…*” (Romans 1:20). And it is why the Psalmist could say: “*The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands*” (Psalm 19:1). It is also why scripture uses analogies from nature to teach higher truths (such as “go to the ant…” in Proverbs 6:6).

Wisdom then issues an invitation that is a counterpart to the prior seduction of the adulteress (7:14-21). She has prepared a splendid banquet, and she calls out to the naive, from the heights of the city (9:3, compare to 8:2): “*Forsake your folly and live*” (9:6).

The next few verses (9:7-12) explain why one should not try to teach this wisdom to the scoffer: he will simply turn against you and hate you for it. This is what Jesus also said: “*do not give what is holy to dogs, or cast your pearls before swine*” (Matthew 7:6). But if you teach the wise, they will gladly receive it, and love you for it.

In the final verses of chapter 9, the father returns to consider the adulteress. She continues to call out to the naive, claiming that “stolen water is sweet; and bread *eaten* in secret is pleasant” (9:17). This is the way of death.

Moses had taught that one must choose either to obey Torah or not, with consequences of life or death: **“***I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live*” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Similarly, Psalm 1 presents two ways: the counsel of the wicked, leading to death, and the counsel of the Lord, leading to life. Solomon is here presenting the same choice: the way of Wisdom, unto life, or the way of the adulteress, unto death.

# 6 Proverbs – Wealth and Work

One of the most important practical topics addressed in scripture is that of work and money. This is especially prominent in Proverbs. We will consider both the benefits and dangers of wealth, and our responsibilities as stewards of all that God has entrusted to us.

Benefits of wealth:

Consider first the temporal value of wealth.

     “*The rich man’s wealth is his fortress, the ruin of the poor is their poverty*” (10:15).

This is to say that cash reserves afford some protection against calamities. Emergency funds are a good idea, for a person who has no reserves can be destroyed by mishaps.

“*Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant, than he who honors himself and lacks bread*.” (12:9).

This proverb makes the somewhat obvious point that life can be better - easier and more pleasant - for those who have wealth. This is in contrast to those who merely present a false image of social status, with false pride. Practical benefits come from actual wealth, not from impressions made upon others. See also Proverbs 13:7.

Also, wealth brings empowerment, rather than slavery — “*The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower becomes the lender’s slave*” (22:7).

There are also some potential spiritual benefits of wealth.

 “*The ransom of a man’s life is his wealth, but the poor hears no rebuke”* (13:8).

Money can sometimes be useful as a “ransom” for the soul, in that it affords the opportunity to pay restitution, when one is rebuked for sinning against others. Such payment, as prescribed in the law, has redemptive value (consider Zacchaeus, Luke 19:8). But the demand for paying a fine or restitution has no impact on a person who is too poor to make any payment. He therefore does not “hear” the rebuke.

Proverbs 19:4,7 make the point that poverty can lead to social isolation, the loss of friends. And Agur, in Proverbs 30:7-9, wants to avoid poverty, so that “*I not be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God*”.

Dangers of wealth

On the other hand, there are also warnings of the many dangers of wealth. Many of the Proverbs warn against the sins that result from the love of money (consider Colossians 3:5). Wealth encourages a boastful pride, which blocks our access to God. Proverbs 28:11 says that the rich (*ashir*) person is “wise in his own eyes”; consider also the church of Laodicea (Rev 3:17-18). This is the background for New Testament teachings about the rich and the poor, such as “blessed are the poor” (Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20), and woes for the rich (Luke 6:24-25). Excessive wealth can become one’s boast and ultimate security, and hence a false god (idolatry). “*Those who trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches.... man in his pomp will not endure; he is like the beasts that perish*” (Psalm 49:5-20; also Proverbs 27:1 and Jeremiah 9:23-24). Proverbs 18:10-11 says that a rich man’s wealth is his refuge, in contrast to the righteous, for whom the Lord is his refuge.

Proverbs teaches that wealth does not give dependable security, and certainly has no value for eternal security. “*Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration of it. When you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For wealth certainly makes itself wings like an eagle that flies toward the heavens*” (23:4-5). “*He who trusts in his riches will fall*…” (11:28). These sayings pertain to our relationship with God - that wealth can turn a person away from loving God with all your heart and soul.

Another danger is that the pursuit of wealth can be at the expense of others: cheating and defrauding, violating the command to love your neighbor as yourself:

10:2 — “*Ill-gotten gains do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death*.”

In the end, unrighteousness wealth is of no benefit. Only righteousness delivers from death (see 11:18, contrasting deceptive wages and true reward)

28:8 — “*He who increases his wealth by interest and usury gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor*” (also, 13:22).

Wealth obtained unrighteously can nevertheless eventually benefit the needy. For example, consider the Rockefeller and Bill Gates foundations.

Following are several proverbs that speak against ill-gotten gains.

Prov 11:1 — “*A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight*” (and 16:11; 20:10,23)

13:11 — “*Wealth obtained by fraud dwindles, but the one who gathers by labor increases it.”*

15:27 — “*He who profits illicitly troubles his own house, but he who hates bribes will live*.” (also 17:23)

16:8 — “*better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice*”

20:17 — “*Bread obtained by falsehood is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be filled with gravel*.” (also 21:6)

22:16 — “*He who oppresses the poor to make more for himself, or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty*.” (also 22:22-23)

23:10-11 — “*Do not move the ancient boundary*...”

28:6 — “*Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than he who is crooked though he be rich.*”

28:22 — “*A man with an evil eye hastens after wealth*…”

Stewardship

The governing principle for work and the use of money is that we are to be good stewards for God. We have a delegated responsibility to be productive, to take care of all that He has entrusted to us, and to use all things according to His purposes and values. The Proverbs that speak of these stewardship responsibilities can be sorted into the four categories below.

1. Be diligent:

10:4,5 —  “*Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich*.” (also 12:24,27; 19:15; 21:5)

12:11 — “*He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who pursues worthless things lacks sense*.” (also 28:19)

14:23 — “*In all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty*.”

18:9 — “*He who is slack in his work is brother to him who destroys*”

20:4 — “*The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, so he begs during the harvest and has nothing*” (also 15:19; 19:24; 20:13; 21:25; 24:30-34)

26:13-16 — The sluggard is wise in his own eyes

1. Take care of your productive resources:

24:27 — “*Prepare your work outside and make it ready for yourself in the field; afterwards, then, build your house*.”

27:18 — “*He who tends the fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who cares for his master will be honored*.”

27:23-27 — “*Know well the condition of your flocks, and pay attention to your herds*”

1. Do not waste wealth on self-indulgence:

21:17 — “*He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not become rich*.” (also 21:20)

23:20-21 — “*Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe one with rags*.” (also 23:29-35; 25:16)

1. Be generous, and gracious to the poor:

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

11:24-26 — “*There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want. The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered. He who withholds grain, the people will curse him, but blessing will be on the head of him who sells it*.”

14:31 — “*He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honors Him*.” (also 14:21)

19:17 — “*One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his good deed*”

21:13 — “*He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered*.”

22:9 — “*He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor*.” (also 22:16,22-23; 28:27; 29:7)

Stewardship is a major theme in scripture, from the beginning, where Adam was instructed to take care of the garden. We continue to have this responsibility to protect and care for God’s creation, to use it productively and profitably, for His purposes. And our perspective in this is to be long-term (unto eternity), and corporate (for all peoples). Our stewardship is ultimately for the sake of others, for the sake of the kingdom, extending to future generations and into eternity. In this, there is no profit in compromising integrity for the sake of material gains. There is no profit in gaining the world and losing your soul.

# 7 Proverbs – The Tongue

Another prominent topic in Proverbs is speech, referred to metaphorically as the mouth, the lips or the tongue. The tongue reveals the heart, and it is powerful in its effects, for either good or evil (see James 3:1-12). Dishonesty is an abomination to the Lord, and malicious or careless speech can do great harm both to the speaker and to others.

Dishonesty:

10:18 — “*He who conceals hatred has lying lips,*

*and he who spreads slander is a fool*.”

12:19 — “*Truthful lips will be established forever,*

*but a lying tongue is only for a moment*.”

12:22 — “*Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,*

*but those who deal faithfully are His delight.*”

19:5 — “*A false witness will not go unpunished,*

*and he who tells lies will not escape*.” (also 19:9,28; 21:28; 24:28; 25:18)

27:5-6 — “*Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed.*

*Faithful are the wounds of a friend,*

*but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy*.” (also 27:9)

27:14 — “*He who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning,
It will be reckoned a curse to him*.”

28:23 — “*He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue*.” (also 26:28; 29:5)

Good Words and Evil Words

10:6 — “*Blessings are on the head of the righteous,
But violence covers the mouth of the wicked*.”

10:11 — “*The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,
But the mouth of the wicked conceals violence*.” (*hamas*)

10:13,14 — “*On the lips of the discerning, wisdom is found,
But a rod is for the back of him who lacks understanding.
Wise men store up knowledge,*

*but with the mouth of the foolish, ruin is at hand*.” (also 14:3)

12:13-14 — “*An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips,
But the righteous will escape from trouble.
A man will be satisfied with good by the fruit of his words,
And the deeds of a man’s hands will return to him.*” (also 13:2; 18:7)

18:20-21 — “*With the fruit of a man’s mouth his stomach will be satisfied;*

 *He will be satisfied with the product of his lips.*

 *Death and life are in the power of the tongue,*

*and those who love it will eat its fruit*.”

10:20-21 — “*The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver,*

*the heart of the wicked is worth little.*

*The lips of the righteous feed many,*

*but fools die for lack of understanding*.” (also 10:31-32; 11:9; 15:7; 16:13)

11:11 — “*By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,
But by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down*.” (also 12:6; 18:6)

12:18 — “*There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword,*

*But the tongue of the wise brings healing*”

15:1 – “*A gentle answer turns away wrath,*

*but a harsh word stirs up anger*.”

15:4 — “*A soothing tongue is a tree of life,
But perversion in it crushes the spirit*.” (also 16:21,24; 25:15)

15:23 — “*A man has joy in an apt answer,*

*and how delightful is a timely word!*”

25:11-12 — “*Like apples of gold in settings of silver*

*Is a word spoken in right circumstances.*

*Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold*

*is a wise reprover to a listening ear.”*

17:7 — “*Excellent speech is not fitting for a fool,*

*much less are lying lips to a prince*.”

18:4 — “*The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters;*

*the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook*.”

Many words vs. few words

10:8 — “*The wise of heart will receive commands,*

*but a babbling (lips) fool will be ruined.*” (also 10:10)

10:19 — “*When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable,
But he who restrains his lips is wise.*” (also 12:23; 13:3; 17:27-28; 18:13; 21:23)

15:28 — “*The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,
But the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things*.” (also 29:20)

11:13 — “*He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets,
But he who is trustworthy conceals a matter*.” (also 18:8)

17:9 — “*He who conceals a transgression seeks love,
But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends*.” (also 20:19)

# 8 Proverbs – The Family

Husbands and Wives

Of first importance in the family is that the husband be faithful to his wife. The warnings against the adulteress (2:16-19; 5:3-6; 6:24-35; 7:6-27; 9:13-18; 22:14; 23:27-28) are applicable, as well as the following two verses that make the same point.

5:15-19 — *“Drink water from your own cistern,*

*And fresh water from your own well...”*

27:8 — *“Like a bird that wanders from her nest,*

*So is a man who wanders from his home.”*

These admonitions against adultery are complemented by several positive exhortations to cherish ones wife as a precious gift from the LORD.

19:14 — *“House and wealth are an inheritance from fathers,*

 *but a prudent wife is from the LORD.”*

18:22 — *“He who finds a wife finds a good thing*

 *and obtains favor from the LORD.”*

12:4 — *“An excellent wife is the crown of her husband,*

 *but she who shames him is like rottenness in his bones.”*

14:1 — *“The wise woman builds her house,*

 *but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.”*

The above verses also present the opposite situation, of a contentious or shameful wife, who thus fails to be a “gift from the LORD”. The following verses expand upon this issue.

19:13 — *“A foolish son is destruction to his father,*

 *And the contentions of a wife are a constant dripping.”* (also 28:15-16)

21:9 — *“It is better to live in a corner of a roof*

 *Than in a house shared with a contentious woman.”* (also 21:19; 25:24)

These teachings correspond to Paul’s in Ephesians 5:21-25, of mutual love and submission, but with an emphasis on the husband loving the wife and the wife submitting to the husband.

Children

It is the duty of parents to pass down teachings from generation to generation.

*“When I was a son to my father, tender and the only son in the sight of my mother,*

*Then he taught me and said to me, ‘Let your heart hold fast my words;*

*Keep my commandments and live.’”* — 4:3-4

This instructing includes discipline, which is an act of love, demanded by love.

 *“My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproof,*

*For whom the Lord loves He reproves,*

*Even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.”* — 3:11,12

This is followed, in the remainder of the proverbs, with an emphasis on the necessity for corrective physical discipline.

13:24 — *“He who withholds his rod hates his son,*

 *But he who loves him disciplines him diligently.”*

The “rod” was used by a shepherd for two purposes: 1) to gently nudge a sheep that is wandering away, to redirect it onto the correct path; 2) as a weapon, to drive away a predator that threatens the sheep. The practical question is whether this verse pertains to the latter use (corporal punishment), or the former use (a gentle verbal rebuke). Considering the many instances in Proverbs where “rod” is used as a weapon for punishment (see 10:13; 22:8; 26:3), it is proper to take the traditional, literal interpretation, that it means what it says: spanking. This is also supported by the verses below.

20:30 — *“Stripes that wound scour away evil, and strokes reach the innermost parts.”*

23:13-14 — *“Do not hold back discipline from the child,*

 *Although you strike him with the rod, he will not die.*

*You shall strike him with the rod, and rescue his soul from Sheol.”*

To “strike him with the rod” is definitely physical. This falls within the more general wisdom of performing unpleasant tasks in the present, for the sake of long-term future benefits (see 14:4). Withholding the rod is a sign of laziness and unwillingness to perform an unpleasant task, which means there is no genuine love (the point of 13:24).

Discipline must also be applied at the opportune time.

19:18 — *“Discipline your son while there is hope, and do not desire his death.”*

Notice that discipline is needed “while there is hope”. If not applied early, as needed, there will come a time when there is no hope for correction. Furthermore, the need for corrective discipline is universal, pertaining to all children, as noted in the following verse.

22:15 — “*Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child;*

 *The rod of discipline will remove it far from him.”*

Children are naturally foolish and rebellious, and the way to correct it is by “the rod”.

Below is a well-known verse generally interpreted as assurance that a parent’s efforts in training their children will eventually accomplish the intended purpose.

22:6 — *“Train up a child in the way he should go,*

 *Even when he is old, he will not depart from it.”*

The first phrase literally says: “dedicate a child according to his way”. This could be interpreted either as “the way he should go”, or “the way he wants to go”. The latter is more compatible with all other scripture, so a better translation is:

 “If you allow a child to go his own way,

Even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

This is then a warning against being overly tolerant. This agrees with 19:18 - to discipline “while there is hope”. It is also in accord with the following proverb, which summarizes the general consequences of how parents perform one of the most important responsibilities on earth - giving instruction and corrective discipline to their children.

29:15 — *“The rod and reproof give wisdom,*

 *But a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother.”* (See also 29:17)

The consequences for society are even greater. How parents discipline their children will determine whether people accept authorities, or selfishly resist all authority. A community or a nation cannot endure the latter.

# 9 Proverbs – Self Control

One of the major teachings of Proverbs is that passions are to be subjected to prudence. Passionate emotion provides the necessary energy for life, but wisdom must provide it the necessary training and direction. This is contrary to popular notions of our present age, where raw passion is often exalted as honest expression. But according to Proverbs, an honest expression of folly is still folly, and an honest expression of evil is still evil. In our present culture, prudence is often demeaned as calculating and ungenuine. But, according to Proverbs, thoughtful calculation is good and necessary, when governed by truth and love, by the fear of the Lord. The alternative, to speak without thinking or to act without thinking, is dangerous and is folly.

The folly of a short temper

14:29 - *“He who is slow to anger has great understanding,*

*But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly.”* (See also 14:17; 17:27; 29:11)

19:11 — *“A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger,*

*And it is his glory to overlook a transgression.”*

16:32 - *“He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,*

*And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.”*

19:19 — *“A man of great anger will bear the penalty,*

*For if you rescue him, you will only have to do it again.”*

22:24-25 — *“Do not associate with a man given to anger;*

*Or go with a hot-tempered man,*

*Or you will learn his ways*

*And find a snare for yourself.”*

Personal consequences of misguided passion

14:30 -- *“A tranquil heart is life to the body,*

*But passion is rottenness to the bones.”*

The contrast here is between one who is driven by selfish jealousy or envy and one who has a sound or healthy heart – a heart informed by wisdom. The latter brings healing and life, the former brings sickness and death.

23:1-3 — *“When you sit down to dine with a ruler, consider carefully what is before you,*

*And put a knife to your throat if you are a man of great appetite.*

*Do not desire his delicacies, for it is deceptive food.”*

25:28 — *“Like a city that is broken into and without walls*

*Is a man who has no control over his spirit.”*

Social consequences of losing control - strife

15:18 - *“A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,*

*But the slow to anger calms a dispute.”* (see also 29:22)

18:19 - *“A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city,*

*And contentions are like the bars of a citadel.”*

20:3 - *“Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man,*

*But any fool will quarrel.”* (see also 17:14; 26:17; 26:21)

Addictions (wine)

20:1 — *“Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,*

*And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.”*

23:20-21 — *“Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine,*

*Or with gluttonous eaters of meat;*

*For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty,*

*And drowsiness will clothe one with rags.”*

23:29-35 — *“Who has woe? Who has sorrow?*

*Who has contentions? Who has complaining?*

*Who has wounds without cause?*

*Who has redness of eyes?*

*Those who linger long over wine,*

*Those who go to taste mixed wine.*

*Do not look on the wine when it is red,*

*When it sparkles in the cup,*

*When it goes down smoothly;*

*At the last it bites like a serpent*

*And stings like a viper.*

*Your eyes will see strange things*

*And your mind will utter perverse things.*

*And you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea,*

*Or like one who lies down on the top of a mast.”*

*‘They struck me, but I did not become ill;*

*They beat me, but I did not know it.*

*When shall I awake?*

*I will seek another drink.’”* (see also Ecclesiastes 11:9)

# 10 Proverbs – Planning

Wisdom and understanding are oriented towards the future - considering the future consequences of our actions, and how they align with the final hope and purpose of life. As free agents we therefore have a responsibility to be forward-looking, which means a responsibility for planning. But all planning is to be done in the fear of the Lord, knowing that His purpose will be achieved in the end. This is the assurance of hope to those who are in Christ, and a warning of judgment for those who are not. A wise person will do the following four things:

1. Consider future consequences and long-term goals and purposes
2. Think before speaking or acting -- impulsiveness and haste are unwise
3. Seek and accept counsel from others
4. Remember that God has the last word

Prepare, plan, and seek counsel

There are many admonitions in Proverbs to think about and prepare for the future - to do the right thing in the present, for the sake of the future. An example follows.

10:5 — *“He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely,*

*But he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully.”*

 [also, 6:6-8].

There are also warnings against rash and hasty speech or action. Wisdom requires that we first take time for careful thought.

20:25 —    *“It is a trap for a man to say rashly, ‘It is holy!’*

*And after the vows to make inquiry.”*

[also, warnings against surety— rash or unwise promises].

21:5 — *“The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage,*

*But everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.”*

Furthermore, we must listen to and learn from others. The wisdom from God is dispersed among all His people, in various measures. To listen to God requires that we listen to His people.

15:22 — *“Without consultation, plans are frustrated,*

*But with many counselors they succeed.”* (also 11:14; 24:6)

God has the last word

16:1-4 — *“The plans of the heart belong to man,*

*But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.*

*All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight,*

*But the LORD weighs the motives.*

*Commit your works to the LORD*

*And your plans will be established.*

*The LORD has made everything for its own purpose,*

*Even the wicked for the day of evil.”*

God’s answer (16:1) to man’s plans is in the actual resulting events and outcome, which will accomplish His purpose (16:4).

16:9 — *“The mind of man plans his way,*

*But the LORD directs his steps.”*

[the LORD prepares or establishes his steps, i.e. enabling success]

This same principle applies to prayer, by the intercession of the Spirit, as Paul indicates in Romans 8:26.

16:33 — *“The lot is cast into the lap,*

*But its every decision is from the LORD.”* (also 18:18)

In spite of our plans and every attempt at control, there are always many factors outside our control, which may appear random and chaotic. But we can accept it all as being under the sovereignty of God, Who causes all things to advance His purpose. The decision is from the Lord.

10:20-21 — *“Listen to counsel and accept discipline,*

*That you may be wise the rest of your days.*

*Many plans are in a man’s heart,*

*But the counsel of the LORD will stand.”*

21:30-31 — *“There is no wisdom and no understanding*

*And no counsel against the LORD.*

*The horse is prepared for the day of battle,*

*But victory belongs to the LORD.”*

26:1 — *“Do not boast about tomorrow,*

*For you do not know what a day may bring forth.”* [quoted in James 4:13-16]

In summary, we have a duty and responsibility for thoughtful planning, seeking counsel from others, confident that God’s purposes will be achieved, but with humble recognition that He determines the final outcome. *“The victory belongs to the LORD”.*

# 11 Proverbs – Words of King Lemuel

These are “*the words of King Lemuel, the oracle (burden) which his mother taught him.*”

The Lord’s word was a burden placed upon her, as to a prophet: a burden that required her to speak out. In the first section of this chapter (verses 2 - 9), she admonishes her son to live up to the demands and expectations of a king.

2*What, O my son? And what, O son of my womb? And what, O son of my vows?*

Concerning the vows, compare to 1 Sam 1:11.

3*Do not give your strength to women, or your ways to that which destroys kings*.

Remember that Solomon’s wives were the main contributor to his downfall.

4*It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink, 5for they will drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. 6Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter.7Let him drink and forget his poverty and remember his trouble no more.*

 It is best to not take this “advice” (verses 6-7) literally, but rather as sarcasm.

*8Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate.9Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy*.

The next section is a heroic poem, describing the Worthy (Valiant) Woman. This same term (valiant) was also applied to Ruth (Ruth 3:11). It presents a deliberate contrast to similar poems of ancient times, where women were mainly praised for their charm and beauty, and were usually expected to be passive homebodies. The woman in this poem is praised for her industry, her wise commercial enterprises, and her godliness.

The poem is structured as an acrostic, with the first letter of each verse following the order of the Hebrew alphabet**.** This indicates it is a full expression of what the author wants to say: everything from A to Z.

The introduction to the poem, verses 10-12, expresses the value of this woman.

***aleph*** - 10*An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels*.

***beth*** - 11*The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain*.

***gimel***- 12*She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.*

Verses 13-27 describe her activities and industry, both for her family, and for the community, especially the poor.

***daleth***- 13*She looks for wool and flax and works with her hands in delight.*

***he*** - 14*She is like merchant ships; she brings her food from afar.*

***waw*** - 15*She rises also while it is still night* [like a lioness]*, and gives food* [prey, as in Job 4:11] *to her household and portions to her maidens*.

***zayin*** - 16*She considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard*.

***heth*** - 17*She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong.*

***teth*** - 18*She senses that her gain is good; her lamp does not go out at night*.

The meaning here is not that she continues working all night, but rather that the household is prosperous enough to keep the lamp burning.

***yodh*** - 19*She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle*.

***kaph*** - 20*She extends her hand to the poor, and she stretches out her hands to the needy*.

***lamedh***- 21*She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet*.

***mem***- 22*She makes coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.*

***nun*** - 23*Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.*

***samekh*** - 24*She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies belts to the tradesmen.*

***ayin*** - 25*Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she smiles at the future.*

***peh*** - 26*She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*

***sadeh*** - 27*She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.*

In the conclusion, versus 28-31, she is praised:

***qoph*** - 28*Her children rise up and bless her; her husband also, and he praises her, saying:*

***resh*** - 29“*Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.”*

***shin*** - 30*Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.*

***taw*** - 31*Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.*

Lemuel’s mother thus commends to him the ideal to look for in a wife. It is not unexpected that a mother’s foremost “burden” would be that her son obtain this gift from God - the valiant woman.

# 12 Proverbs – Sayings of Agur

The main instruction of this chapter is to not transgress boundaries – to not claim possessions or privileges to which you are not entitled. This was the original sin, and the root of all sin. Wisdom consists in recognizing these boundaries, and observing them. The chapter consists of seven sayings, and a conclusion:

I. Introduction, personal confession and requests of Agur (1-9)

II. Main Body: Seven sayings (10–31)

A. Three sayings about greed and arrogance (10–16)

B. Four sayings about ways of life (17–31)

III. Conclusion – admonition to Ithiel (32-33)

These sayings are introduced as: *“The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an inspired utterance. This man’s utterance to Ithiel: ‘I am weary, God, but I can prevail.’”* The following verses (2-4) suggest that it is the task of acquiring wisdom that makes him weary, but he can succeed due to revelation from God.  *“Surely I am more stupid than any man, and I do not have the understanding of a man. Neither have I learned wisdom, nor do I have the knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended into heaven and descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has wrapped the waters in His garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name or His son’s name? Surely you know!”* On his own, he is ignorant, and unable to acquire wisdom or the knowledge of God. Only God Himself has the comprehensive knowledge that is the essential foundation of any certain knowledge. It is only as a “son” of God, that is as a disciple of God, that he or anyone can acquire true knowledge. He is totally dependent upon revelation, which is a gift from God.

He then speaks of the trustworthiness of God’s word (vs 5 and 6): *“Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words, or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.”* These observations should be compared to Deuteronomy 30:11-14 and Job 28:12-28.

Agur then makes two petitions to God (vs 7-9): “*Two things I asked of You. Do not refuse me before I die:* *keep deception and lies far from me,* *give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is my portion,* *that I not be full and deny You and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or that I not be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God.”* The two most important things to him are that he be delivered from deception, and that he be delivered from any circumstances, like wealth or poverty, that could turn him away from God. “*Lead us not into temptation*”.

The main body of sayings (vs 10 - 31) begins with a warning against trying to take over another person’s position through dishonesty. “*Do not slander a slave to his master, or he will curse you and you will be found guilty*.” The “slave” is likely to be a government official.

The second saying (verses 11-14), consisting of four parts, is about the greedy and arrogant person: “*There is a kind of man who curses his father and does not bless his mother. There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness. There is a kind—oh how lofty are his eyes! and his eyelids are raised in arrogance. There is a kind of man whose teeth are like swords and his jaw teeth like knives, to devour the afflicted from the earth and the needy from among men.”* The next verse (15a) is about greed, looking back to vs 11-14 and forward to 15b-16: “*The leech has two daughters: ‘Give,’ ‘Give.’”*

The third saying, also composed of four parts, is about things that are never satisfied: *“There are three things that will not be satisfied, four that will not say, ‘Enough’: Sheol, and the barren womb, earth that is never satisfied with water, and fire that never says, ‘Enough.’”* In this alternating parallelism, the womb is associated with earth, and sheol with fire. In the struggle between life and death, neither is ever satisfied.

This is followed by another single-line proverb (vs 17), about social order in the home: “*The eye that mocks a father and scorns a mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.”* The two proverbs of vs 10 and vs 17 are in parallel, presenting the same two ideas as in Psalm 101:5 -- slander and the haughty look.

The fourth saying (18-20) expresses wonder at the beautiful ways of life ordained by creation: *“There are three things which are too wonderful for me, four which I do not understand: The way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the middle of the sea, and the way of a man with a maid.”* In contrast is the way of perversion: *“This is the way of an adulterous woman: she eats and wipes her mouth, and says, ‘I have done no wrong.’”*

The fifth saying (21-23) presents other perversions that violate the ordained order. *“Under three things the earth quakes, and under four, it cannot bear up:* *under a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when he is satisfied with food,* *under an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maidservant when she supplants her mistress.”*

The sixth saying (24-28) gives examples of the glory of humble creatures who live wisely. *“Four things are small on the earth, but they are exceedingly wise: the ants are not a strong people, but they prepare their food in the summer; the shephanim are not mighty people, yet they make their houses in the rocks; the locusts have no king, yet all of them go out in ranks; the lizard you may grasp with the hands, yet it is in kings’ palaces.”*

The seventh saying (29-31) then speaks of the glory of exalted creatures, concluding with man (the king) exercising dominion, in the image of God. *“There are three things which are stately in their march, even four which are stately when they walk: the lion which is mighty among beasts and does not retreat before any,* *the strutting rooster, the male goat also, and a king when his army is with him.”* The example to us is that we are first to be humble and wise, and then God can exalt us to our intended positions of dominion.

He then concludes with an admonition to Ithiel: *“If you have been foolish in exalting yourself, or if you have plotted evil, put your hand on your mouth. For the churning of milk produces butter, and pressing the nose brings forth blood; so the churning of anger produces strife.”* The three verbs, churning, pressing, churning, are the same word; nose and anger are also the same word. The final point is that obsessing or dwelling upon anger results in strife. This is the practical application of the more general instruction that there is an ordained order and there are boundaries that God has established, which we must accept and live within. Learn contentment (Psalm 46:10; Ecclesiastes 4:3; Philippians 4:11). This is our humble role as creatures, submitting to our Creator.