

Day 140 Proverbs (cont'd)

Control of Self

Self-control Prov 25.28; 29.11 One of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5 is given as *self-control*, and here is shown that Paul drew his example from the Proverbs. To have the patience to rein in annoyance is a key virtue.

Rashness Prov 20.25 ; 21.5; 28.8;29.20 Humans are so prone to hasty actions which they then repent at leisure. The Scriptures teach us that spontaneity is not always best

Temper and Patience Prov. 12.16; 14.16,17; 14.29;15.18;16.32; 19.11; 19.19; 22.24,25; 29.8; 29.22 There is a strong link made in these verses between outbursts of anger and stupidity, while wisdom and prudence are linked to patience. A personal favourite of my own, learned when a child at school was 16.32, in the old version *He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who ruleth his spirit, than he who taketh a city.*

Drunkenness and Gluttony Prov. 20.1; 23.19-21 The effects of over-indulgence are highlighted here, and those who are wise do not do so. It is not that wine or food are evil, but the poison in man makes him use them as escapes from his brokenness. 23.29-35 is an amazing word-picture of the drunk who is completely disorientated, like a sailor in a storm by the abuse of alcohol.

Adultery Prov. 5. 1 – 23; 6.20-35; 7.1 – 27; 22.14 The length of this section of the Proverbs on adultery makes this one of the matters most addressed by Solomon. The allure of women was, of course, Solomon's eventual downfall, but here he seeks to pass on to his son the dangers of allowing men's brains to be between their legs. Solomon is aware of the ability of women to use men's lust to their gain, and no doubt Solomon had plenty of experience of this.

There is a beautiful passage here about the sanctity of marriage and the glory of faithfulness in 5.15-20, instructing the son to have sex only with his wife – 'may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.'

The adulteress is seen as holding the man captive. This is also connected in with prostitution, who will 'reduce you to a loaf of bread.' 6.26. In particular, young men whose lust is keener are warned against being persuaded by the 'man-eater' who will actually, in some cases, kill him for his possessions.

Prostitution Prov. 23.26-28, 29.3 Prostitution is seen as equivalent to robbery, a waste of wealth and a breaker of covenants.

Day 141

Control of the Tongue

Later, in the New Testament, the brother of Jesus, James, writes in his letter's third chapter of the power of the tongue. No doubt he would have been drawing on much of the teaching of the Proverbs, which commend the sparing use of the tongue, knowing the dangers of its misuse.

Wise and Foolish Talk Prov. 14.3;15.2;15.7;16.23; 18.6,7; 19.1; 23.15,16 There is something so desirable about hearing the wise speak; when they open their mouth, the heart is lifted and the mind is engaged. On the other hand, foolish talk is wearying, tiresome; the writer here says it is better to be a poor and honest person than a loquacious fool.

Righteous and Wicked Talk Prov.10.20,21; 10.31,32; 11.11; 12.13,14; 13.2; 15.28; 17.4 The word righteous in these verses is *Tzaddiq* (Heb טָדִיִּץ) meaning just or upright, a word used of God, while this is set against the word for evil, *rasha'* (Heb רָשָׁע) meaning bad or unjust. Here, the fruitfulness of righteousness is exalted, while the destructiveness of evil is made clear.

Appropriate Speech Prov.15.23; 16.21; 16.24; 25.11; 27.14 Most of these verses praise the attractiveness of pleasant and wise speech, while the last reference tells us that making a big noise to do something nice for our neighbour early in the morning will just end up getting his back up!

Maintaining Silence Prov. 10.19;12.23; 13.3; 17.28; 18.13; 21.23 A silent fool sounds as clever as a silent sage! (17.28) We can get into so much trouble by putting our mouth in gear before our brain...

Controlled Speech Prov.15.1; 17.27; 25.15 The benefits are extolled of restrained, peace-making speech – the word for gentle here is Hebrew *rak* (Heb רַךְ) meaning soft, tender – perhaps encouraging the tentative use of words, rather than harsh assertions.

Flattery Prov. 26.28; 28.23; 29.5 The word in Hebrew for flattering is *chalaq* (Heb חָלַק) meaning smooth or slippery. The flatterer is clever, but the plain-speaker will be more appreciated in the end.

Slander and Gossip Prov. 10.18; 11.13;16.28;17.9;18.8 (mirrored in 26.22) ; 20.19;26.20 'A gossip separates close friends' (16.28). Gossip is the vulture circling over misfortune and dissension, swooping in to feast on the carcass of troubled human relations. To be avoided at all costs.

Hurtful Talk Prov. 11.12; 12.18; 15.4;16.27; 25.23; 26.2 Hurtful speech breaks down, healing speech builds up, and insults which are undeserved cannot remain to harm.

Quarrelling Prov.17.4; 17.19; 20.3; 22.10; 26.21. Contentious people are seen here as foolish, while wisdom is seen in the avoidance of strife. (20.3)

Lying Prov.12.19; 12.22; 17.20; 19.5; 19.22; 21.6 Because God Himself cannot be untrue, to lie is to deny God. 19.22 tells us that what man longs for is *chesed*, the dependability of God and by extension, of man. Thus, to be poor is better than to be faithless.

Power of the Tongue Prov.18.20, 21 James must have had these verses in mind in particular when writing of the power of the tongue in James 3.6. The tongue can be the instrument of great fruitfulness, or can bring an end to a life with a word.

Day 142

Disharmony and Strife

Solicitation to Evil Prov. 1.10-19; 16.29; 25.26; 27.3; 28.10 The writer inveighs here against those who try and warp the reputable man into evil ways. The end of such conduct is violence and death (these men lie in wait for their own blood...) The promise for remaining clean is a good legacy. (28.10)

Violence Prov.3.31-32;21.7; 21.29 It is ironic that, in our time of the early 21st century, that one of the parties of Palestinian liberation is named *chamas*, which in Arabic is a word meaning strength; in Hebrew, it means 'violence' (Heb **כחמה** *chamas*) Suffice to say that violence, like evil, will end in futility and rejection by God.

Murderers Prov.28.17 The murderer will run forever with a bad conscience.

Causing Others Harm Prov. 3.29,30 Recalling the invocation in the law to love one's neighbour, planning his harm is not permissible.

Revenge Prov.20.22; 24.28,29 Jesus strongly counseled against revenge, and here in the Proverbs, the principle is already well-established. Rather, vengeance should be left to the Lord, who judges justly and knows the whole story, not just our part of it.

Dissension and Strife Prov. 6.16-19; 17.1; 18.18; 18.19 Pride, lies, plots and trouble-making are all detested by the Lord. Better to have little in peace than wealth with strife.

Meddling Prov.26.17 A warning to busybodies not to interfere in other people's disputes.

Honesty

Truthfulness Prov. 12.20; 13.5; 24.26; 26.18,19 Here deception is berated, and integrity praised. (An honest answer is like a kiss.. 24.26) Even if we are only practical-joking, we should be aware that the outcome could backfire on us (26.18,19)

Accurate Weights Prov.11.1; 16.11; 20.20; 20.23 No one is to give false measures, which are a lie in kind – the Lord hates such.

Boundary Stones Prov.22.28; 23.10,11 Land-grabbing is ruled out, particularly when the orphaned might be robbed of their inheritance. The Lord defends them personally.

Wrongfully Obtained Gains Prov.10.2; 13.11; 20.17; 20.21 Get-rich quick and swindling schemes will not have good outcomes, while the one who saves bit by bit will find it accrues more. (13.11)

Bribery Prov.15.27; 17.8; 17.23; 21.14 While there might be a suggestion in these verses that bribes can get things done (17.8) it is clear overall that bribery is a hateful practice.

Justice

False Witnesses Prov. 12.17; 14.5; 14.25; 19.9; 19.28; 21.28; 25.18 Lying is forbidden by the *torah*, thus false testimony and perjury are ruled out for the one who pleases the Lord.

Open-Mindedness Prov. 18.17 The first to speak is not the only one to be heard and considered. The whole story needs to be weighed up.

Judicial Justice Prov.17.15; 17.26; 18.5; 21.15; 24.11,12; 24.23-25; 28.5; 29.26 The word for justice in these references, where it appears, is *mishpat* (Heb מִשְׁפָּט) that quality which sets things in order in accordance with God's design. It is not just about punishing the guilty, but also about restoring things to the way they were before the injustice took place.

In all cases, to punish the innocent, or to withhold testimony which could save them is unacceptable. The Lord Himself is the one who oversees the ways of *mishpat*.

Day 143

Economic Well-Being

Wealth and Poverty Prov.3.9-10; 10.15;11.4; 11.28; 13.8; 14.20; 15.16; 17.16; 18.11; 18.23; 19.4; 19.6; 19.7; 22.2; 22.7; 23.4,5; 27.7; 28.6; 28.8; 28.11; 28.20-22 The overall message from these copious verses about wealth and poverty is that riches are no guarantee against foolishness, and they can even make life burdensome and without joy (27.7) Riches will be passed on to another, and poverty with peace and knowledge of the Lord is to be preferred (15.16) . However, it is highlighted that poor people will not make friends easily, since people seem to gravitate towards the prosperous.

Benevolence and Generosity Prov.3.27-28; 11.24-26; 13.22; 14.21; 18.16; 19.17; 21.13; 22.9; 25.14; 28.27 The joy of giving to those in need is emphasized in the Proverbs. The well-known verse is here, 'He who gives to the poor, lends to the Lord.' (19.17) There is also encouragement to leave a legacy for our children (13.22) and signs that prosperity is linked to generosity of heart.(11.24-26)

Oppression of the Poor Prov. 13.23; 14.31; 15.15; 16.8; 22.16; 22.22,23; 29.7; 29.13 The Lord has a clear 'option for the poor'. Exploiting the poor is seen as oppression (Heb. אֲשָׁף 'ashaq, from root meaning to defraud or to bleed dry) and the warning is that the Lord will take up their case and plunder those who plunder the needy. (22.22,23)

Industriousness Prov. 6.6- 11; 10.4-5; 10.26; 12.11; 12.24; 12.27; 13.4; 14.4; 14.23; 15.19; 16.26; 18.9; 19.15; 19.24 (mirrored in 26.15) ; 20.4; 20.13; 21.17; 21.25-26; 22.29; 24.27; 24.30-34; 26.14; 27.18; 27.23-27; 28.19 We tend to speak today about 'the protestant work ethic', as though a good attitude to work and avoidance of sloth was something that came in with Calvin! However, there is abundant reference to this in the Proverbs, to show that the work ethic is very much a Jewish and Godly concept. The word which occurs again and again to epitomize the workshy is the Hebrew word *atzel* (Heb. אֲצֵל from a root meaning to lean or to slouch), the one who could work, but won't. In a society which encourages dependency and reward for those who will not work, we

need to question whether this approach is healthy or helpful for the future of men and women.

Conservation Prov.21.20 Being wise with what we have rather than consuming everything at one go is a good thing.

Surety for Another Prov.6.1-5; 11.15; 17.18;20.16 (mirrored in 27.13); 22.26-27 In an age which is based on credit and borrowing, the words of the Proverbs here come hard to our ears. It is basically saying, don't make promises up ahead for what you don't have the means to pay for. And certainly don't stand as guarantor for the debts of others! In the light of the financial crises of the end of this first decade of the twenty-first century, this advice has been spurned on an institutional scale, with banks trading in bad debt, and the outcome is now obvious. The ominous warning is becoming reality for many today – 'if you lack the means to pay, your very bed will be snatched from under you'!.! (22.27)

Day 144

Persons and Attributes

Parents and Children Prov.1.8-9; 10.1; 11.29; 15.20; 17.2; 17.6; 17.21; 17.25; 19.26; 20.20; 23.22-25 One of the most troubling aspects of humanist liberal western society is the undermining of the integrity of parents. Media, arts, justice systems, government all combine to teach the young that parents are just one of many voices they should listen to, and that the most important thing is the expression of one's own individuality, as formed by the selective acceptance of 'experts' in education, politics and the intelligentsia. Parents are depicted as weak, selfish and generally unhelpful in drama and writing, and laws are framed to favour the state's control of children over their families.

The Proverbs stand in stark contrast to this antitheistic attitude. There is nothing so to be desired in life as wise parents, and the benefits of good mothering and fathering can be provided by no other input. There is hope here also for grandchildren (17.6), the crown of the aged, and mature, balanced, Godly children are a delight to their parents.

Those who despise and reject parental input are seen as fools, and are a disgrace. (19.26) Thus parents are the pride of their children, not their bane! (17.6)

The Elderly Prov.16.21; 20.29 In a time where youth is idolized and age is shunted shamefully out of sight, the statement that grey hair is an asset, not a liability is worthy of hearing. Under it lies a lifetime of experience and wisdom!

Women and Wives Prov. 11.22; 12.4; 14.1; 18.22; 19.13,14; 21.9 (mirrored in 25.24) ; 21.19; 27.15-16 The noble, wise woman is praised in these verse, and set in antithesis against the foolish, quarrelsome woman, who makes life a misery for her husband. The prudent wife is better than riches – more can be found on her qualities in Proverbs 31.

Kings and Rulers Prov. 14.28; 14.35; 16.10; 16.12-15; 17.7; 17.11; 19.12; 20.2; 20.8; 20.26; 20.28; 21.1; 22.11; 23.1-3; 24.21,22; 25.2-7; 28.2-3; 28.15-16; 29.4; 29.12; 29.14 These references point out the joy to a people of a wise and upright monarch; even though he is to be feared by the wrongdoer, when the ruler shows *chesed*, grace-

obligation and *emet* dependability, his rule reflects God's heart. On the other hand, the latter references point out the disgrace of a tyrant (28.16) or of one who listens to corrupt counsel (29.12) The king is also required to judge the poor with equity. (29.14)

Messengers Prov 13.17; 25.13 In a time when there was no telecommunication or even reliable post, much depended on a trustworthy network of messengers to bring the right news. Good news is a refreshment – perhaps a message worth being heard by the often cynical media of today!

Companions Prov. 12.26; 13.20; 14.7; 17.17; 18.24; 24.1,2; 27.8-10; 29.24 The benefit of good, wise friends is commended here over against the company of disreputable people. So often people get sucked into a bad crowd out of a sense of wanting to be accepted, but the Proverbs discourage us from envying the company of the wicked. (24.1,2)

Various Concerns

Caution Prov 16.17; 22.3; 27.12; 22.5 The references here encourage the avoidance of anything which compromises integrity; there is nothing wise about careering along into expediency which actual compromises morality.

Reputation Prov.22.1; 25.9,10 One of the attributes of a good church leader in 1 Tim 3.7 is to be well thought of by those outside the church. The Proverbs say a good character is something to be worked at. Particularly, the keeping of confidences and avoidance of gossip is key to avoiding shame. (25.9,10)

Courage Prov.3.25,26; 14.32; 22.13; 24.10; 26.13; 28.1 The people of the Lord can have a confidence which the craven, godless fool does not enjoy. It is not that the follower of the Lord has 'confidence in confidence alone', nor yet self-confidence, but they can be confident, because their hope is anchored in the One who sustains them.

Hope Prov.13.12; 13.19; 23.17,18 'There is surely a future hope for you, which will not be cut off.' (23.17,18)

Day 145

Various Observations

Joy and Grief Prov.14.10; 14.13; 15.13; 17.22; 18.14; 25.20; 27.11; 29.6 The light heart is set here in antithesis with the heavy heart. The human being will experience both in their lifetime, each in a unique way and mix of circumstances. It is clear that gladness is a good medicine, (17.22) but the heavy heart must be respected, and given its valid space also (25.20). We are warned that laughter and grief are never too far from each other. (14.13).

Good News Prov. 15.30; 25.25 Good news is a tonic, and can revive wilting souls.

Curiosity Prov. 27.20 Just like the modern proverb, ‘curiosity killed the cat’, there is a subtle link here between man’s quest for knowledge and the threat of death near at hand. Man’s thirst to know often takes him into unsafe territory.

The Saying of Agur Prov. 30.1- 33

Little is known about the man Agur ben Jakeh. His name (Heb אָגוּר) means ‘gathered’ or ‘collected.’ It could be a name given to Solomon, the ‘Collector’ of wise words.

He speaks to a pair named Ithiel and Ukhal; however, if the Hebrew is read slightly differently, rather than two names, the meaning is ‘I am weary O God, I am weary and faint.’ This would fit with the cry of the Collector that really he knows nothing. (v.2) There is something very fitting about this complaint of the sage – the more he knows, the more he knows how little he knows, and how much more there is to know. He sees how vast God is, and how his mind cannot get around the wonders of the universe, notably around the being of God and His offspring.

v.7-9 An amazing prayer for balance in life – for neither riches nor poverty, so that he will neither forget God nor be reduced to the sin of theft.

v.10 – 33 The major part of the sayings of Agur are stylized epithets built around the numbers three and four. It seems as though, by adding a fourth thing to the list in each case, Agur is highlighting the fourth one. Thus, the different things he muses on are

- things which are not satisfied (the grave, the barren woman, dry land and fire)
- things which are beyond his comprehension (the eagle, a snake, the ship and men and women)
- things which are against nature (the servant made king, the well-fed fool, the married woman who is not loved, and the maid who usurps her mistress.)
- things which are small but wise (ants, rabbits, locusts and lizards)
- things which are stately and proud (a lion, a rooster, a he-goat and a king with his army.)

The Sayings of King Lemuel Prov. 31.1 – 9

Again, there is no clue as to who King Lemuel is – perhaps a foreign King whose wisdom Solomon included in his collection, whose origins are now lost in time.

The first part of his sayings are in the form of a mother’s counsel to her royal son. He is warned against the allure of women which could ruin him, and then about the power of alcohol to warp a King’s judgment. She encourages her son to protect the poor and oppressed.

The Wife of Noble Character Prov. 31.10-31

The second part of Lemuel’s oracle, which closes the book of Proverbs, is the celebration of the virtuous wife. This is a beautiful sketch of the greatest qualities of a woman,

notably a woman of industry and confidence. This is no shrinking violet, nor downtrodden drudge. She is praised and appreciated by her family, she is not only providing for her family, but for the needy around her. She has business skills, and has confidence in God, teaching her family.

In a time when so much emphasis is put on physical appearance of women, the closing statements are illuminating – ‘charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting, but a woman who is in awe of the Lord is to be honoured and commended for her deeds, widely known in the community.

Day 146

Songs of Solomon

Psalm 127

This is a song of going up to the Temple, but in the hands of Solomon.

The opening verse is that given to the city of Edinburgh for its motto by the Covenanter leaders in 1639, abbreviated to the Latin words ‘*nisi dominus frustra*’ ‘unless the Lord.. in vain’ Solomon would well have known the futility of trying to operate without the Lord’s blessing upon his endeavours. His latter days are reflected later in the book of the Ecclesiastes, the preacher, and this is in similar vein. There is no point trying to achieve without the presence of God being sought.

Thus, he also sees the future wellbeing of the kingdom as being in the hands of the Lord. His success of his house, the future of his dynasty, lies with the conduct of his sons. Solomon is therefore confident in the Lord that the promise God has made will be safe in his offspring, little knowing what waywardness lay within them.

The Song of Songs Song of Song 1.1 – 8.14

The Canticles or the Song of Solomon, is known in Hebrew as *The Song of Songs* (Heb. שִׁיר הַשְּׁרִים *Sheer ha-Shirim*) and is a beautiful and erotic love-poem. There has been some debate over the centuries about whether it should be included in the Canon of Scripture, because of its explicit lyrics, but its inclusion, often because it is seen as an allegorical book pointing to the relationship between, for Christians, Christ and the Church, is a celebration of the physical love relationship between man and woman.

It takes the form of a drama played out between a young woman and her lover, with a chorus of friends adding an occasional interlude.

1.1 – 4a The beloved longs for the kisses of her lover, and longs to be taken into the bridal chamber.

1.4b The chorus together admire the love of the lovers.

1.4c – 7 The beloved is not a fair-skinned palace woman, but an outdoor worker, tanned by the sun, and made to look after her family’s land and vines. She searches for the lover’s flocks in a stylized pastoral idyll.

- 1.8-11 The lover encourages her to come seeking him, and praises her beauty.
- 1.12 – 2.2 Interchanges between the lover and the beloved luxuriating in their physical intimacy.
- 2.3 – 13 The beloved praises the strength and physique of her lover, as he comes and calls to her to come away with him, for it is the time of love, the spring.
- 2.14 – 15 The lover looks for the beloved and her face. He wants everything that could distract from their love, like little foxes in her vineyards, to be shut out.
- 2.16 – 3.11 Here the beloved pines for her lover, and searches for him. She complains of the pain of love awakened before it can be consummated. But her lover is coming for her, her King Solomon in his crown.
- 4.1-15 This is an intensely erotic description of the physique of the beloved by the lover, using such euphemisms for her delights as ‘mountains of myrrh’ and ‘a sealed fountain’ (meaning the the girl is a virgin).
- 4.16 The beloved invites the lover to be at one with her in love-making.
- 5.1a. The relationship is consummated by their union, the lover exults in their intimacy.
- 5.1b The friends celebrate the consummation of the lover and beloved.
- 5.2-8 Now, whether in dream or reality, the story moves on, and the beloved hears her lover trying to come into her chamber. As she rises in sensual desire to bring him in, she finds he is gone, and she has to go searching for him, at cost to her reputation, but her love drives her. She tells her friends to speak to her lover of her deep love.
- 5.9 The chorus of friends question the beloved about her passion for the lover.
- 5.10-15 The beloved paints a vivid word picture of the physique of her lover, who is ‘altogether lovely.’
- 6.1 The friends ask which way the lover went, so that they know where to look.
- 6.2-3 She suggests they look in the lily garden, where he will be gathering flowers for her.
- 6.4-12 The beloved comes, the King, praising his new wife.
- 6.13a The friends cry out to the dark-skinned girl to come back and let them see her in her bridal finery.
- 6.13b – 7.9a A further exulting in the beauty of the Shulammitte, with a very explicit reference to embracing her breasts (v.8) in his ardour.
- 7.9b – 8.4 The beloved urges her lover to come and be with her in the countryside among the pomegranate blossom and the mandrakes, considered an aphrodisiac. There is

a wonderful thought here, that if the lover had been a brother, she could have kissed him sooner without being upbraided!

8.5 – 7 Contained in these verses are some of the most powerful words about love that are in the Scriptures. The beloved asks to be a seal upon the lover's arm, as a constant reminder to him. Real love is strong as death, and its jealousy as unyielding as the grave, beyond price and payment.

8.8-9 The friends speak of a young sister who could one day be such a beloved bride, but for now she must be guarded and protected from all attentions.

8.10-12 Meanwhile, the beloved rejoices in her ability to bring the King contentment; the theme of the vineyard comes back at the close of the song, seen here as a symbol of her love to give.

8.13-14 The song ends with a last call exchanged between the beloved and the lover, seeking for each other's presence.