

Proverbs 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 2 He stores up sound wisdom for the upright.

He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, and watching over the way of his saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice, and equity every good path. For wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil, and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.

So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God. For her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed.

None who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life. So you will walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the righteous. For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it.

[1 : 42] But the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it. In Proverbs chapter 2, the father takes up his address to his son again.

Bruce Waltke observes that this chapter could be regarded as an alphabetic poem. Many of the subjects introduced in this chapter will be unpacked in the chapters that follow, and in this chapter we have a condensed expression of many themes that we will see later on.

Even though it is not an acrostic, it is a single sentence with 22 verses, corresponding in their number to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It divides into two equal parts, the first half from verses 1 to 11, and the second from verses 12 to 22.

The two halves can each be broken down further into two stanzas of four verses, and one of three verses. The first half concerns the formative effect of wisdom upon the young man, and the second half the way that this formation will lead to the son's deliverance from a series of particular dangers, from wicked men and from the adulterous woman.

When reading scripture more generally, the structure is illuminating of the meaning, as when we do a jigsaw puzzle, it is far easier to assemble the puzzle when we are attending both to the shapes of the pieces and to the images upon them.

[3 : 01] The poetic forms of the book of Proverbs are means by which its wisdom is discovered. And we'll see this quite clearly within this chapter. There's a movement here from the reception of the words from without to the treasuring of the words within, which we see in the first few verses.

Words must be memorised and meditated upon. The first couple of verses enjoying a mental posture of attentiveness to the sources of wisdom without us, and a disposition, a turning of the heart towards understanding.

Between verses 1 and 2 and verses 3 and 4, we have a movement from a receptive posture to a posture of pursuing wisdom in a far more active sense. The sun is supposed to take a posture similar to that by which Lady Wisdom was described in chapter 1 in his pursuit of insight.

It is one thing to be receptive to wisdom when it comes across our path, another to be proactive and relentless in our pursuit of it. Far too many people receive wisdom somewhat reluctantly, rather than running after it.

There is an implicit comparison here to the young man pursuing a woman, and then to the quest for hidden treasure, an endeavour requiring great commitment and diligence, yet promising considerable rewards.

[4 : 16] The result of such a pursuit for the hidden treasure of wisdom is revealed in the second stanza. Nothing less than the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God. The fear of the Lord has earlier been described as the beginning of wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is both what sets people on the right course for the pursuit of wisdom, but also that which the quest deepens. The knowledge of God is personal and intimate acquaintance with one's creator.

Wisdom is not primarily wrested from the world, but granted by God. The gift of the Lord's wisdom principally comes from his mouth, from the words of wisdom given in the law, and from the words of the sages to whom he has granted insight, words that are delivered through the words of the father and the mother.

The person who meditates upon the word of the Lord and upon the words of those to whom the Lord has granted wisdom will have a great advantage over any relying simply upon their own understanding.

The Lord is the source of wisdom for the righteous. As the righteous person constantly turns to the Lord for guidance, he experiences the Lord's protection in his way. This protection is, I believe, both the Lord's gracious protective oversight of the path of his people and the inherently safer nature of the path of righteousness.

[5 : 31] There are instructive parallels between verses 9 to 11, the third stanza, and the preceding stanza in verses 5 to 8. As Waltke recognises, verses 5 and 9 are paralleled, both summing up the result of a form of education in a statement beginning, then you will understand.

Verses 6 and 10 are paralleled, both substantiating the summary statement that precedes them in a statement beginning with the word for. Finally, verses 8 and 11 are paralleled, both speaking of the way that the person who has been formed in such a manner will be watched over and guarded.

In the parallels, we witness an important progression from the wisdom of the external instruction of the Lord to the wisdom of a person who is deeply internalised and now delights in such instruction. They meditate and reflect upon it. This movement is a very important one if we are to understand the wisdom literature more generally. In wisdom, there is an internalising of the word in delight, in memorisation, in meditation, in desire, and in understanding.

This is something seen in the Psalms and also in places like the Book of Proverbs, The wise words of the Lord have become part of the righteous, just as the tablets of the covenant are treasured in the Ark of the Covenant at the heart of the temple, so the word of the Lord is treasured in the heart of the wise.

[6 : 56] Many of us have great wisdom around us. We have wise counsellors, we have access to the insights of gifted scholars and sages in our libraries, and most importantly, we have the guidance of divine wisdom in Scripture to which we devote ourselves.

However, those who devote themselves to such external sources of wisdom will gradually find that those voices become part of their internal conversation, that their insight has taken up residence within, that wisdom has come into their heart, as verse 10 suggests.

As wisdom is internalised, knowledge will become increasingly desirable, pleasant to the wise son's soul. The guarding that such a person experiences will increasingly be experienced from within, such a person will have a discretion and understanding that protects him.

Devotion to the instruction of the Lord and internalised wisdom, the formation described in the first half of the poem of this chapter, will deliver the son from the evil way, from the wickedness of men such as those described in the preceding chapter.

The men described in these verses are marked out by their rejection of the straight and clear paths of uprightness, for crooked paths in darkness, on which people will fall or be snared.

[8 : 12] Such men, in contrast to the wise son, who finds knowledge pleasant, rejoice in doing evil and delight in its perverseness. They value evil for its evilness.

Such men are not to be trusted, their speech is twisted and their ways are devious. In addition to being delivered from wicked men, wisdom will also deliver from the forbidden woman and the adulteress.

The young man is tempted not just by the gang and by the appeal of their vision of an evil brotherhood, but also by the allure of the promiscuous woman, the promise of whose sexual favours tempt him to devote his energies to her pursuit.

This promiscuous woman will be an important figure in the book of Proverbs more generally, especially in chapters 5 to 7. She's paradigmatic in many ways. She represents the appeal of folly herself.

The men of the gang tempt with their perverted speech. The adulterous woman tempts with her smooth words. Speech and the weighing of words is a recurring theme throughout the book of Proverbs.

[9 : 14] The wise person is a master of his own words and a prudent judge of those of others. The temptation of the adulterous woman is felt chiefly through the smoothness of her words, through their power to flatter those who have not established a firm grasp of the proper sources of a healthy self-regard.

Once again, as Waltke notes, there are parallels between two stanzas here, verses 12 to 15 and verses 16 to 19. Verses 12 and 16 are paralleled in their statements concerning deliverance from the dangerous speech of some threatening group or figure, the speech of perverse men and the words of the strange woman.

Verses 13 and 17 both speak of forsaking something. The perverse men forsake the paths of uprightness and the forbidden woman forsakes the companion of her youth.

Verses 14 to 15 and verses 18 to 19 describe the respective paths of the perverse men and the forbidden woman, indicating the doom of those who follow them. The poem ends with a description of the ways and paths of the good and the righteous, in contrast to those offered by evil men and adulterous women.

The theme of contrasting ways, a wise and righteous path leading to life and a foolish and wicked path leading to death, is one that is encountered throughout the scriptures. We ought to consider the way that the wisdom literature develops this theme of the contrasting paths.

[10 : 38] The path of righteousness and the path of wickedness, the path of obedience and the path of disobedience, are now elaborated to include the juxtaposition of wisdom and folly, as the one following the path of righteousness begins to discern more fully its rationale, even beyond the duty of obedience.

The final two verses declare the contrasting fates of the upright and the wicked, much as in places like Psalm 1, but perhaps the clearest comparison is between these verses and Psalm 37.

In verses 5 to 11 of that Psalm, we read, Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday.

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger and forsake wrath.

Fret not yourself, it tends only to evil, for the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while the wicked will be no more.

[11 : 44] Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there, but the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. A question to consider.

Where else in Scripture do we see the choice between two paths placed before people?