

# Proverbs 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Proverbs chapter 6 My son, if you have put up security for your neighbour, have given your pledge for a stranger, if you are snared in the words of your mouth, caught in the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, and save yourself, for you have come into the hand of your neighbour.

Go, hasten and plead urgently with your neighbour. Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber. Save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the hand of the fowler.

Go to the ant, O sluggard, consider her ways and be wise. Without having any chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.

How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech, winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, points with his finger. With perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord.

[ 1 : 09 ] Therefore calamity will come upon him suddenly. In a moment he will be broken beyond healing. There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him.

Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.

My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching. Bind them on your heart always, tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you.

When you lie down, they will watch over you. And when you awake, they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life, to preserve you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress.

Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes. For the price of a prostitute is only a loaf of bread, but a married woman hunts down a precious life.

[ 2 : 12 ] Can a man carry fire next to his chest, and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched? So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife.

None who touches her will go unpunished. People do not despise a thief if he steals, to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry. But if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold.

He will give all the goods of his house. He who commits adultery lacks sense. He who does it destroys himself. He will get wounds and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped away.

For jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge. He will accept no compensation. He will refuse, though you multiply gifts. From the discussion of the adulterous woman in Proverbs chapter 5, Proverbs 6 moves to some examples of foolish or wicked men, in verses 1 to 19, before returning to the adulterous woman again at the end of the chapter.

Bruce Waltke argues that these warnings against wicked men are connected with the warning about the forbidden woman in the previous chapter, in a way that encourages the readers to perceive parallels, and the severity of the danger in both the cases.

[ 3 : 25 ] The opening verses deal with a situation where the son has acted as a guarantor for another. As surety, all of the other person's debts could be demanded of him if they reneged on their duty of paying.

This is a very dangerous position to put oneself in, through careless benevolence or some other motive. The figures of the neighbour and the stranger in verse 1 seem to be parallel to each other in the literary structure of the text.

However, as figures, they would seem to be contrasting. Perhaps stranger is a way of describing the neighbour whose character and reliability the guarantor has not adequately judged.

Rash vows are dangerous things to make, and the son must beware of making them. The person who makes such vows is caught in the snare of their own words. In such a situation matters are urgent, and no time must be wasted.

The son must immediately go to the neighbour for whom he has pledged himself a surety, and must pester him until he pays the debt, lest the son be ruined on account of his neighbour's failure to pay up.

[ 4 : 25 ] Until the debtor pays the debt, however, the son is like a gazelle, or a bird that is in great peril of being caught and killed. Verses 6 to 11 warn the sluggard, the lazy man, against the consequences of his inaction.

He is instructed to get up and go to look at the ant, learning a lesson from its industriousness. It doesn't require direction or rule from some other party in order to gather its grain.

While ants may have social organisation, they don't need leaders to press them into action. The ant does the necessary work in the necessary season. The sluggard, by contrast, is difficult to rouse.

The sluggard is always putting off what should be done immediately. He just wants a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands, putting his duties off for just that little bit longer, an indefinite period of time.

Time slips away from him. But then, all at once, the bitter consequence of his abandoned duties comes upon the dozing sluggard like a bandit, stripping him of all that he possesses.

[ 5 : 26 ] The sleep by which he puts off responsibilities and relaxes leaves him without the vigilance to guard himself, and poverty and want strike him unawares. In Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, one of the characters is asked how he went bankrupt.

Two ways, he answers. Gradually, and then suddenly. This is the experience of the sluggard. The process of falling into poverty comes slowly, and perhaps barely perceptibly, as he inches towards the precipice in his careless inattention.

And then, all of a sudden, he is falling headlong, with rock bottom rapidly approaching. Verses 12-19 describe another figure whose doom comes suddenly, this time the troublemaking rabble-rouser.

He is a worthless fellow, a son of Belial, language that is used of various wicked men in scripture, especially those who stir up strife and conflict. His primary mode of dealing is crooked speech, devious and deceptive language that distorts the truth, and incites conflict.

His speech is accompanied by veiled motions, designed secretly to disclose his true intentions and beliefs to his fellows, or to dishonor authorities in their sight.

[ 6 : 36 ] His heart is perverted and set on malicious plans, for which the secret instigation of conflict is generally key. He unleashes discord, purposefully setting it loose and allowing it to do its mischief, while hiding his own hand.

However, like the sluggard, the downfall of such a man will be sudden and unexpected. We are not told how his downfall will come about. It could be one of a great many ways.

Perhaps he is caught in the act of causing his trouble. Perhaps others conspire against him in the ways that he has conspired against them. Perhaps he is caught up in the discord that he has created, and he is destroyed within it, as he hadn't realised the danger of the forces that he was playing with.

Perhaps what is in view here is a divinely delivered judgement. Whatever it is, he is not prepared for it, but it is certainly coming upon him. Verses 16-19 describe this figure of the troublemaker, taking up much of the language of the preceding verses, describing the perverse anatomy of such a man. The form of the saying, there are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him, is designed rhetorically to amplify the hearer's sense of the Lord's abhorrence of the things about to be mentioned.

[ 7 : 49 ] Perhaps we can see a movement down through the body, in verses 17 and 18, with the whole figure being summed up in verse 19. For this troublemaker, the parts of his body have been so consistently devoted to these wicked activities, that the wicked uses to which they have been put have twisted and determined their basic character.

The troublemaker's core sin is the breaking of the ninth commandment. He bears false witness against his neighbour, seeking by his words to encourage disputes and conflicts among brothers, to set people against each other.

The concluding section of the chapter returns to the theme of the adulterous woman, with which the larger passage opened at the beginning of chapter 5. Here the son is charged to attend to the commandment of the father, and the teaching of the mother.

It is important to note that the father and the mother are a unity. Both of them are involved in the training of the son. Both of them are active teachers, not just leaving the task to the other.

We probably ought not to put much weight on the different words used for their teaching here. That said, paying attention to the bigger picture, there do seem to be important differences between the two.

[ 8 : 57 ] Although modern people may often think that speakers are interchangeable, the same message given by different persons can have a very different force to it. When the father speaks to his son, he speaks to his son as one who was himself a son once, and he is speaking to one who will be a father in his own turn.

The gendered character of that teaching is even more important on this particular subject. The father is likely speaking as one with first-hand experience of the temptation and the resistance of the forbidden woman, and choosing the wife of his youth instead.

The teaching of a father is an apprenticeship in manliness for his son, part of the son's initiation into the world of men, a training in virtue which the mother isn't equipped to give in quite the same way, despite the great importance of her particular input.

The mother, on her part, speaks to her son, as she does at the end of the book of Proverbs, as one with greater personal insight into the character of various types of women, a sort of knowledge that the father does not have to the same degree.

The father does the overwhelming amount of the direct teaching of the son in Proverbs, but on several occasions we hear him supporting the teaching of his wife, strengthening her words both with his added witness, and by his support for her instruction.

[ 10 : 14 ] The picture that emerges is one in which both parents actively collaborate in the moral training of their child, supporting each other in the task, while each speaking with a force that is particular to themselves in their motherly or fatherly capacity.

At a few points in the book of Proverbs, the son is instructed to have a close and constant relationship with the teaching of his parents. In chapter 3, verses 1 to 3, And in verses 21 to 23 of that chapter, All of this recalls the command of Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 6 to 9 concerning the Torah, And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

You shall write them on the doorposts of your house, and on your gates. The son who commits himself to his parents' teaching will be protected by it, even if he has not yet fully internalized it in the form of deeper understanding.

Wisdom begins with fearing the Lord and honoring our parents, from which postures insight can slowly arise. The teaching of the good parents will form the child to the point where the lessons have become part of him.

[ 12 : 08 ] These lessons will protect him from the wicked woman, and their words from her smooth and seductive speech. In verse 25, the father charges his son not to desire the beauty of the adulterous woman.

We should observe the deepening of the command at this point. It is not merely walking after the adulterous woman that is being warned against here, but desiring her. We are dealing with the tenth commandment here, the prohibition on coveting, not merely the seventh, the prohibition on adultery.

The warning against desiring such a woman is followed by several reasons. Desiring such a woman is actually desiring your own destruction, if you see what it all entails. The first rationale for not desiring such a woman involves the contrast between the cost of a prostitute, who might in some cases be haggled down to the price of a single loaf of bread, and the adulterous woman, whose favours are seemingly freely given, but who may well cost a man his life when her husband discovers.

It is worth recalling that Israel had a death penalty on adultery. This argument definitely doesn't legitimate the use of prostitutes. Rather, it is highlighting the unconsidered costs of adultery, in particular the vengeance of a wronged husband.

The man who has relations with such a woman is, as the verses that follow make clear, playing with fire. He will unavoidably be burned. The illustration of a thief is then brought forward.

[ 13 : 30 ] The severity of a thief's crime can be mitigated by a sense of his economic desperation. If a starving thief steals food, people won't judge him that harshly. However, even such a thief may be required to pay back the full measure of what he has stolen, and much more besides.

He may well be ruined by the restitution that he is expected to give. If the consequences for such a thief's crimes are bitter, how much more those for the one who commits adultery?

If he's lucky, he might get away with a severe beating. However, he may well lose his life, and while the starving thief won't face that strong of a moral judgment, the man who lies with the adulterous woman, will be utterly shamed and disgraced.

A betrayed husband is not the sort of person who will lightly forgive. No matter what compensation the adulterous man offers, the vengeance of the betrayed husband will not easily be assuaged.

A question to consider. The seventh commandment prohibits the committing of adultery. The book of Proverbs takes that commandment and unpacks it, relating it to the desiring of the forbidden woman, and explores all of the ways in which that sin grows from its first seed to its full expression and its bitter harvest.

[ 14 : 43 ] How might this fuller description help the wise son to put up guards against this sin and more effectively to resist it?