

Proverbs 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 21. The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever he will. Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart. To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin. The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty. The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour and a snare of death. The violence of the wicked will sweep them away because they refuse to do what is just. The way of the guilty is crooked, but the conduct of the pure is upright. It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. The soul of the wicked desires evil. His neighbour finds no mercy in his eyes.

When a scoffer is punished, the simple becomes wise. When a wise man is instructed, he gains knowledge. The righteous one observes the house of the wicked. He throws the wicked down to ruin.

Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered. A gift in secret averts anger, and a concealed bribe strong wrath. When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but terror to evildoers. One who wanders from the way of good sense will rest in the assembly of the dead. Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man.

He who loves wine and oil will not be rich. The wicked is a ransom for the righteous, and the traitor for the upright. It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman.

Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it.

Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life, righteousness and honour. A wise man scales the city of the mighty and brings down the stronghold in which they trust. Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. Scoffer is the name of the arrogant haughty man, who acts with arrogant pride. The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labour. All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. How much more when he brings it with evil intent? A false witness will perish, but the word of a man who hears will endure. A wicked man puts on a bold face, but the upright gives thought to his ways. No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord. Elsewhere in the book of

[3 : 02] Proverbs, the king is described as giving life-giving dew to the land. Here his heart is described as like a stream of water held in the hands of the Lord, who moves it wherever he will. The king's heart, which ideally should irrigate the land with justice, is under the rule of the Lord. Such kingship is described in Isaiah chapter 32 verses 1 to 2. Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice. Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. The Lord's mastery over the heart of the king is also seen in the book of Exodus, as the Lord strengthens and hardens the heart of Pharaoh.

The Lord's knowledge of and mastery of the heart is also seen in verse 2. We can easily delude ourselves about the true intents of our heart, but we cannot deceive the Lord. The Lord weighs and understands our hearts. He can perceive our true motivations and the true moral character that we have. The invalidation of sacrifice and prayer and other acts of worship, by unrighteousness or injustice, is a common theme within the New Testament and the Old. What the Lord really desires is not the ritual sacrifices, so much as the hearts of his people and their obedience. This principle can be seen in the story of King Saul in 1 Samuel chapter 15 verse 22. And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. Hosea chapter 6 verse 6 is one of the verses that Jesus quotes on a few occasions in his ministry.

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Proverbs chapter 15 verse 8 also expresses a similar principle.

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him. A person's lamp can be a way of describing the principle by which they act.

[5 : 07] Proverbs chapter 6 verse 23. For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life. In verse 4, however, we see that haughty eyes and a proud heart are the lamps of the wicked.

These lamps are themselves sin, and they lead the person to sin and destruction. It is not just sinful actions that are sinful, but also our faculties and desires that are bent towards sin are themselves sinful.

The book of Proverbs warns on a number of occasions against easy wealth, against get-rich-quick plans. Proverbs chapter 28 verse 20. A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished.

This is a foolish way to seek wealth. A man who is diligent will build up lasting wealth, but the person who is trying to avoid difficult labour, and get rich quick, will end up coming to poverty. He has rejected the principle by which true and lasting wealth is made and maintained. This warning against those who are hasty in trying to get wealth is followed by a warning against wickedness in the gaining of wealth, the person who employs deceit in pursuit of riches.

[6 : 15] Such achievement of wealth is described as like a vapour. It is insubstantial and short-lasting. It will soon evaporate in the heat of the sun. This warning against deceit is followed by another warning against the way of wickedness, a warning against violence.

The principle here is similar to that expressed by our Lord. He who lives by the sword will die by the sword. The wicked will themselves be swept away by the violence that they initiate.

Michael Fox suggests that we should read verse 8 as A man's behaviour may be tortuous, even while his deeds are pure and upright. Such a proverb would be a warning against judging too hastily.

That way of a man that seems strange and unfamiliar may not in fact be wrong. This, however, seems unpersuasive as a reading to me. It is far more likely, I think, to be a straightforward contrast between the way of the wicked and the guilty and the way of the pure.

Verse 9, along with verse 19, Warn against the misery of living with a quarrelsome wife. Such warnings are found elsewhere in the book of Proverbs. In verse 19 of this chapter, It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman.

[7 : 21] In chapter 19, verse 13, A foolish son is a ruin to his father, and a wife's quarrelling is a continual dripping of rain. The warning concerns a quarrelsome wife, in part because the book of Proverbs is overwhelmingly written to young men.

Perhaps the purpose of the proverb is to provide a warning about the potential miseries of an imprudent marriage. A young man led astray by his desires may not give careful thought to the consequences of a bad choice in a marriage partner, yet he would be far better off not being married than being married to such a woman.

Many lonely and unmarried young men have sought to enter into a marriage hastily in order to escape such loneliness. But the loneliness of the unmarried may be nothing when compared to the loneliness of those in an unhappy marriage.

There are few things more miserable than a home filled with contention, and perhaps there is no person better able to sow misery and bitterness throughout the whole of the household than a quarrelsome wife.

The converse of this truth is incredibly important for Proverbs 2, as we see in the final chapter. A faithful and loving wife is the crown of her husband, and can overwhelmingly determine the tenor of an entire household by her presence.

[8 : 32] The wicked man has a deep desire for evil. He is merciless. He does not want to forgive, but rather wants to see the downfall of his neighbour. By contrast, of course, the righteous wants reconciliation.

He desires restoration of the sinner. He is ready to forgive, and he wants to repair the breaches and those things that are broken. The simple person, the person who is yet uninstructed and has not

learned the path of wisdom, can gain wisdom through moral exemplars.

He can learn from the punishment of the scoffer, the connection between deeds and consequences. He can also learn from the company of the wise. The identity of the righteous one in verse 12 is a matter of debate.

Many take it to refer to God. God is the one who brings ruin upon people. However, it could also be a reference to the righteous man. Such a person observes the house of the wicked, and in his imagination, he casts the house down, realising that it is not going to last.

Alternatively, perhaps he casts it down with a word of judgement declared against it. For many commentators, however, this seems too much of a stretch, and the righteous one is taken to refer to God.

[9 : 37] One could see a symmetry between our relationship to the poor and God's relationship to us. The poor depend upon others, upon other people acting on their behalf, and showing compassion upon them.

We depend, in a similar manner, upon the Lord. If we show no love and concern and compassion for the poor, why should we expect the Lord to show such things towards us? This is related to a principle that we encounter on a number of occasions in scripture.

There must be a symmetry between the way that we act to others, and the way that God has acted towards us. And indeed, it is as we act in that way towards others, that we enjoy the benefits of what God has done towards us.

If we do not forgive, for instance, we will not be forgiven. The character of the gift or the bribe that's mentioned in verse 14 has led to diverse readings among commentators.

Bruce Waltke suggests that it is the bribe that turns away righteous punishment. It is an evil attempt to pervert justice. William McCain suggests that rather it is the discreetly given gift designed to improve communication between two parties, to assuage anger.

[10 : 41] One might think of the way that Abigail or Jacob use great gifts to assuage the anger of people coming to attack them. Fox suggests the third possibility. The anger is that of the Lord, and the gift that's given in secret is the gift given to the poor.

It should be read with the verse that precedes it. As someone performs his charity in secret, neither boasting in his own generosity, nor causing the poor to lose face, the Lord's anger will not be kindled against him.

When justice is done in a society, whether by the legal authorities or by the Lord himself, there are contrasting results. The righteous are heartened, but the evildoers are thrown into terror.

It is important that justice be seen to be done. The manifest performance or occurrence of justice gives a signal to all within a society. It is an encouragement to righteousness and dissuasion from injustice.

The fate of wicked people is the subject of verses 16 to 18. The person who willingly leaves the way of righteousness and wisdom will end up in the realm of the dead. The person who's given over to pleasures will find that he becomes poor, and the wicked person is dispensable for society.

[11 : 49] When destruction comes, he will be a ransom for the righteous. He will take the place of the upright in the destruction. We might recall Abraham interceding for Sodom in Genesis chapter 18.

The Lord is deeply concerned that the righteous be preserved, but the wicked by their wickedness have made themselves worthless and will perish. This should be a very sobering thought. John Ruskin, a famous Victorian philosopher and art critic, wrote in a way that well describes something of the principle of verse 20.

Hence it follows that if a thing is to be useful, it must be not only of an availing nature, but in availing hands, or in accurate terms, usefulness is value in the hands of the valiant.

He continues, Or else as dams in a river, of which the ultimate service depends not on the dam, but the miller, or else as mere accidental stays and impediments, acting not as wealth, but, for we ought to have a correspondent term, as ilth, causing various devastation and trouble around them in all directions, or lastly, act not at all, but are merely animated conditions of delay, no use being possible of anything that they have until they are dead.

Solomon here makes a similar point. It's little use to have great value in your house if you don't have the wisdom and the prudence with which to use it. The foolish person can only consume wealth.

[13 : 50] He cannot create it. It is much preferable for wealth to be in the hands of people who can use it productively, and use it for the benefit of many, than for it to be in the hands of fools and sluggards who will squander or destroy it.

Aiming for the right things is the subject of verse 21. Pursuing righteousness and kindness will lead you to find life and honour. Those persons, however, who seek to avoid the pursuit of righteousness and kindness, and get life and honour immediately, end up finding neither.

The effectiveness and the power of wisdom is manifest in its use in strategy and elsewhere. The wise man with his stratagems can overcome the mighty city, a city which could not be defeated by means of great brute force alone.

Self-control continues to be central to the task of wisdom. Keeping your mouth and your tongue is a means to keep yourself out of trouble. The fool, by contrast, speaks in a way that creates a rod for his own back.

Verse 24 describes a recognisable character, the scoffer who is arrogant and haughty, and speaks with raging pride. One of the great tasks of wisdom is to recognise types of persons, to be able to identify the scoffer, to see the more subtle forms of the sluggard, and to recognise a fool even when he has a number of university degrees.

[15 : 08] The sluggard is the subject of verses 25 to 26. He is eaten away by his desire that is unsatisfied, because he has not worked to meet it. While the sluggard is marked by a continual unsatisfied desire, the righteous person can give freely and generously.

Earlier in this chapter, in verse 3, we saw the importance of righteousness and justice over the mere performance of ritual sacrifice. Verse 27 takes this point even further.

The sacrifice of the wicked has already been shown to be an abomination. This abomination, however, is aggravated when the sacrifice is offered for some ulterior motive, as a mask for some sin, or an occasion for injustice, or a way of excusing some sin that the wicked person intends.

In verse 28, we find ourselves in the conflict of the law court. There is a false witness who will ultimately be found out, but the person who listens will endure.

Or perhaps the meaning here is that he will be victorious. The person maybe who listens carefully to the words of the false witness will be able to catch him out in his falsehood. Or perhaps the point is that the faithful witness is one who pays close attention.

[16 : 17] He cares about the truth of the matter, and as a result delivers careful and accurate testimony that will enable him to prevail. The connection of words worth hearing here is interesting.

The person who listens carefully, who has practiced the art of attentiveness, will be the one whose speech is accurate and sound. If the listening of the man in the second verset of verse 28 is to the false witness, perhaps it connects with verse 29.

The wicked man puts on a brazen face, but the upright, who is attentive, perceives the way of the wicked man. The chapter ends on a similar note to that which it began. It began with the Lord's control of the heart of the king, like streams of water, and with the Lord's weighing of the heart. It ends with two other references to the Lord, to the way that the Lord's counsel and plan will prevail, that there is no scheme that could withstand him, and to the fact that whatever preparation is made for the day of battle, the ultimate outcome is from the Lord.

Psalm 20 verse 7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. The outcome of events ultimately lies with him. A question to consider.

[17 : 31] This chapter says a lot about the relationship between wealth and its possessors, or between wealth and the way it has been obtained. What are some of the mechanisms by which the principles described in this chapter in this regard can be seen to hold in the world around us?

