

Proverbs 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 22. A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor meet together. The Lord is the maker of them all.

The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it. The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honour and life. Thorns and snares are in the way of the crooked. Whoever guards his soul will keep far from them. Train up a child in the way he should go. Even when he is old, he will not depart from it. The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender. Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail.

Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor. Drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out, and quarrelling and abuse will cease. He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend. The eyes of the Lord keep watch over knowledge, but he overthrows the words of the traitor. The sluggard says,

There is a lion outside. I shall be killed in the streets. The mouth of forbidden women is a deep pit, he with whom the Lord is angry will fall into it. Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him. Whoever oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth, or gives to the rich, will only come to poverty. Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge. For it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, if all of them are ready on your lips, that your trust may be in the Lord. I have made them known to you today, even to you. Have I not written for you thirty sayings of counsel and knowledge, to make you know what is right and true, that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?

Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate. For the Lord will plead their cause, and rob of life those who rob them. Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways, and entangle yourself in a snare.

Be not one of those who give pledges, who put up security for debts. If you have nothing with which to pay, why should your bed be taken from under you? Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set. Do you see a man skilful in his work? He will stand before kings. He will not stand before obscure men. Proverbs chapter 22 begins by teaching us that a good reputation is far more valuable than great wealth. Favor with the Lord and with one's fellow man is to be preferred over great riches. Although there may be great societal divides and economic disparities between the rich and the poor, when it comes down to it, they are both created by the Lord. There is a fundamental equality in the biblical teaching here. Oliver O'Donovan writes, The equality of human beings is an aspect of the doctrine of creation. It locates every human being equally to every other, as one summoned out of nothing by the Creator's will, one whose life is a contingent gift, created for fellowship with others, and answerable to judgment. Only when social differences, which may be inoffensive or even constructive, tend to deny that created equality, do they expose themselves to such radical critiques as those which Christians have directed against slavery, and more recently racism. To take two examples that commended themselves ecumenically to all Christian consciences. Equality is something that is true about human beings. The language of ideals confuses the most important distinction between equality, as the reality of the relation between any two humans created in the image of God, and equal treatment, as the norm of behaviour that gives some practical expression to this reality. It is a demand of faith that we should lay hold and act upon the truth of human equality. It is in fact an aspect of the belief that God created the human race, and without the one belief, the other must be undermined. But it is a truth beneath the surface, at the metaphysical level, a truth that has to be seen through to, past the differentiated and complexified structures of human society. Human society does not, and cannot yield us, a clear and unhindered view of our equality. To insist that it shall do so, is to want to live metaphysically, that is, to confuse the foundations with the superstructure of human existence, and the result of that is to annul the

created forms in which the elaboration of human society is possible. The fate of all revolutionary equalisation is to make human life unlivable. Proverbs is not at this point teaching such equalisation. Rather, it is reminding us of that basic fact of creation, the fact that we must take by faith, that whatever social and economic disparities may suggest, all persons are equally creatures of God, and must be treated with dignity accordingly. The trouble or danger referred to in verse 3 may be a quarrel. The person who is simple runs straight into quarrels and gets himself enmeshed and entangled in them. The wise man, by contrast, knows better than to get himself tangled up in other people's affairs. He keeps his distance. Humility and the fear of the Lord have been connected in the book of Proverbs on several occasions. Here it's possible that the reward for humility is the fear of the Lord, and from that we have the reward of riches and honour and life. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the person who has humility is aptly disposed to receive this. Wisdom herself rewards those who find her. Riches and honour are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness, in Proverbs 8 verse 18, and in verse 35 of that chapter, for whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord. The crooked, the sluggard, the fool, and other such characters often believe that they are making the way easier by the way that they sin. However, here we see once more that the way of the crooked is characterised by difficulty and pain and danger. The thorns on the way of the crooked are difficult and painful. The snares may be fatal dangers. The crooked here is contrasted with the person who

[6 : 29] guards his soul, who will keep very far from such ways. Raising children is a common theme in the book of Proverbs, and here again we are taught the duty of parents to set the pattern for their children.

Once their children have been set in the right path, they will tend to continue in it throughout their lives. Just as the rich man can rule over the poor man, the person who borrows can be the slave of the lender, either by virtue of the demand that the lender has upon him, or perhaps in the danger of his being reduced to actual slavery. What a man sows, he will also reap. Themes of sowing and reaping are common in the wisdom literature. They give a sense of the fruits of particular actions, the seasonality of activity, the fact that you need to act at particular times if you're going to be effective, and the fact that failures in the past can have great repercussions for the future. Human life is also characterised by seasons of sowing and reaping. Various seasons of our lives are defined primarily by sowing, by actions whose consequences are many years in the future. There are, however, other seasons of life where we are primarily harvesting, where we're reaping the consequences of what we have done in the past, for good or for ill. The person in verse 8 is someone who has sowed injustice, and what he has sown he will receive back himself, and at that point the rod of his fury, the flail by which someone might thresh grain, will fail him. He won't be able to protect himself from the consequences of his actions. The Lord is the patron of the poor. In Proverbs chapter 19 verse 17 we read, whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed. Here again we are reminded that the person who is generous will receive back bountifully from the Lord. The Lord is no one's debtor. John Wesley was once asked if a particular campaign of preaching had produced many additions to the church. His response was a surprising one. No, but there were some blessed subtractions. The presence of certain discontents within a community can affect everyone.

Remove those discontents, and quarrelling and abuse and all these other problems will cease. In scripture there are a number of occasions where people are told to purge out certain people from a community that will corrupt it or lead it into idolatry or sin. We see this in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, where the sinful man has to be purged out like the old leaven. Recognising the scoffers in a community and dealing with them effectively is one of the means by which a community can be built up.

The king is on the lookout for faithful servants. Proverbs chapter 16 verse 13, righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right. The person whose heart is pure and who speaks with wisdom and grace is exactly the sort of person that the king wants to have in his service. The friend of the king here may not just be a particular companion of the king, but rather a more official counsellor. The Lord makes sure that the words of knowledge do not fall to the ground, whereas he will overthrow the words of traitors. Once again we should remember that what Proverbs is teaching is not just about the natural dynamics of the world, but about the way that the Lord is involved in moral governance of his creation. It is he who ultimately secures the victory of the wise. The sluggard is someone who gives excuses in order to avoid work and exertion. Here

are claim that there is a lion outside in the street. The sluggard is often held up as a figure of ridicule in the book of Proverbs. We find a similar verse later on in chapter 26 verse 13. The sluggard says, [10:04] There is a lion in the road. There is a lion in the streets. His folly is obvious, and mockery of him may be one means of rousing him to his senses. In verse 14, the mouth of the forbidden woman is described as a deep pit. Earlier on in chapter 7 verse 27, we are told that the way of the adulterous woman led down to death. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death. Later on in chapter 23 verse 27, we are told that the prostitute herself is a deep pit. For a prostitute is a deep pit. An adulterous is a narrow well. Here, however, it is the mouth of the forbidden woman that is the deep pit. Earlier in the book, in the description of such women, their mouths and their speech were the primary means by which victims were hooked. Understood in this way, the speech of the seductress is the great pit into which people are in danger of falling. The second verset of this proverb, He with whom the Lord is angry will fall into it, is important to consider. The Lord is the one who condemns such people to their doom. He is the one who exposes them to the danger. In Ezekiel chapter 3 verse 20, again if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. While the Lord protects the righteous, he ensnares the wicked. He gives them the rope with which they will hang themselves. As Christians, we pray, lead us not into temptation. Knowing our own weakness and the power that sin still has within us, we seek the protection of the Lord from such snares. Children left to their own devices will not end up walking in the path of wisdom. They are attracted to folly from the outset. This inclination needs to be trained out of them, and careful discipline, including corporal punishment, is a means by which this can be achieved. Once again, the importance of such punishment is to train the child, not as a form of parental vengeance or a way of terrorising children into submission. Good discipline should yield understanding, and should not provoke children to wrath. The interpretation of verse 16 is difficult.

Michael Fox suggests that it could be rendered, there is one who oppresses a poor man, yet he ends up giving him more. There is one who gives to a rich man, yet he ends up in need. If this is an accurate rendering, then it's speaking about the reversals that can occur, where the Lord can turn the tables upon oppressors and leave them in poverty, while the poor they once oppressed are raised up.

In verse 17, we arrive at a new section of the book of Proverbs, and also at quite a surprise. The words of the wise here seem to be using as their background an Egyptian pagan text, the instructions of Amenemope.

This Egyptian text, which evidence suggests precedes the biblical text of Proverbs, is extensively employed and reworked. The Egyptian text is not just lifted here, it's appropriated and refashioned by a faithful Israelite writer. The wisdom literature more generally arises from reflection upon the world, from learning about the patterns of life, with an insight that's been given by God. It relies in large part upon there being patterns within reality that have been set up by the Creator. Those who have been granted insight by God, and those who have reflected upon the law of the Lord, will be best equipped to perceive and to understand these patterns. Wisdom is also something that is cosmopolitan.

You do not have to have received special revelation to be able to perceive some of these patterns in reality. This is what is spoken of often when people talk about natural law. Those with an instinctive grasp of this sort of natural law are able to practice it within the practical reason of living well.

[13:44] Wisdom, or the art of living well, is something that can be brought to greater articulation by some, but for many it is found primarily in sound patterns of life. And much reflection concerning such patterns of life had occurred in pagan nations. In the story of King Solomon we see the cultural interchange that occurred through his wisdom. We also see that his wisdom is compared to the wisdom of men of the East.

He is not the only person engaging in such exploration of the world and his time. In the scriptural reworking of this pagan Egyptian text, we are seeing something of the way in which pagan wisdom can be appropriated by the people of God. The early church would later learn from the wisdom of Athens. The apostle Paul himself quotes pagan poets in the book of Acts and also in some of his epistles.

The faithful people of God do not have a monopoly on truth. There is much truth to be discovered outside of the pages of scripture and outside of the company of the faithful. While we must be

careful in the way that we appropriate these things, here and elsewhere we have biblical precedent, not just from learning from creation apart from special divine revelation, but also for going to pagans and non-Christians to see what we can learn from them. The quest for truth is cosmopolitan.

The quest for truth is the great quest that will traverse many different societies and cultures. It brings people together as fellow travellers from many different times, from many different places, and of many different walks of life and backgrounds. Many Christians in recent years have tried to establish a Christian worldview, a sort of airtight Christian system of thought, hermetically sealed from all other belief systems and philosophies. Yet here and elsewhere, I believe that the biblical text would actually propel us into a receptive engagement and exchange with different cultures and belief systems, challenging us to discover those elements of truth that exist within different traditions of thought, and testing everything by the standard of the word of God, incorporating what we can.

The connection that biblical scholars have drawn between this part of Proverbs and Amenemope is witnessed in something like verse 20, which in many translations reads, The word here translated, 30, has also in older translations been translated as ancient or as noble, or in the Septuagint as three. The fact that many translations now go for 30 is founded upon the connection that biblical scholars have seen between it and Amenemope that has 30 chapters of teaching. Verse 20 reads, Have I not written for you 30 sayings of counsel and knowledge? Amenemope writes, Look to these 30 chapters. They inform, they educate. Bruce Waltke and others have tried to break down the 30 different sayings of this section, but their precise divisions and enumeration is not easy to determine. Identifying some particular affinities between this chapter and parts of Amenemope, we can see, for instance, in verses 17 to 18, compared with Amenemope,

[16:45] Give thine ear and hear what I say, and apply thine heart to apprehend. It is good for thee to place them in thine heart. Let them rest in the casket of thy belly. They may act as a peg upon thy tongue.

With verse 22, Beware of robbing the poor and oppressing the afflicted. Verses 24 and 25, Associate not with a passionate man, nor reproach him for conversation. Leap not to cleave to such an one, that terror carry thee not away. And verse 29, A scribe who is skilful in his business findeth worthy to be a courtier.

In verses 22 and 23, Once again we see the Lord as the guardian and the protector and the guarantor of the poor. The Lord cares for the weak, the oppressed and the afflicted, and he will act against all who mistreat them. The danger of bad company corrupting good habits is seen in verses 24 to 25.

The character of a man who is given to anger can be contagious. If you hang around with such a person, you can become an angry person yourself. And having gained their vice, you risk suffering its bitter consequences. Once again we have a warning against putting up security for others. Chapter 6 verses 1 to 5 provided the most extensive warning along this line. Verse 28 warns against moving the ancient landmark. A very similar verse is found in chapter 23 verse 10, just a few verses later. Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless.

[18:14] Knut Haim observes that this is something that is repeated also in the text of Amenemope. The repetition that we see here in Proverbs seems to be based in part upon a repetition within the source text of Amenemope. The concern here is particularly that of protecting the widows and the fatherless and other vulnerable figures from having their property taken from them by the rich oppressor. A society that did not honour the boundaries of property would swiftly become predatory. A great deal of wisdom consists in being attentive to the world and the people around you.

The final proverb of this chapter encourages people to be alert to those people who are competent and gifted in their orbit, to mark those people and see where they end up. People of great gifts will almost invariably rise up. If you see a very skilful person, he is most likely destined to be elevated. A question to consider. Where else in scripture might we find examples of the cosmopolitan character of wisdom?