

Proverbs 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 7 My son, keep my words, and treasure up my commandments with you. Keep my commandments and live. Keep my teaching as the apple of your eye.
- Bind them on your fingers. Write them on the tablet of your heart. Say to wisdom, You are my sister, and call insight your intimate friend, to keep you from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words.
- For at the window of my house I have looked out through my lattice, I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense, passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house, in the twilight, in the evening, at the time of night and darkness.
- And behold, the woman meets him, dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart. She is loud and wayward. Her feet do not stay at home. Now in the street, now in the market, and at every corner she lies in wait.
- She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him, I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows. So now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you.
- [1 : 1 2] I have spread my couch with coverings, coloured linens from Egyptian linen. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love till morning.
- Let us delight ourselves with love. For my husband is not at home. He has gone on a long journey. He took a bag of money with him. At full moon he will come home. With much seductive speech she persuades him.
- With her smooth talk she compels him. All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast, till an arrow pierces its liver.
- As a bird rushes into a snare, he does not know that it will cost him his life. And now, O sons, listen to me, and be attentive to the words of my mouth.
- Let not your heart turn aside to her ways. Do not stray into her paths. For many a victim she has laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng.
- [2 : 1 1] Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death. Proverbs chapter 7 contains the father's tenth speech, and another extended treatment of the danger of the forbidden woman.
- The focus on women competing for the attention of the young man in the opening chapters of Proverbs encourages us to recognize that wisdom, or the lack of it, is principally determined by those to whom you will give your heart.
- The book of Proverbs frequently moves between the personified women of wisdom and folly and the concrete women the son might encounter, the adulteress, the prostitute, and the wife of his youth.

By moving between these figures, the reader is supposed to recognize, on the one hand, the fact that the pursuit of wisdom must be an affair of the heart, and on the other, the fact that all of the pursuits of love in the young man's life are ultimately to be understood as expressions of the fundamental quest for either wisdom or folly.

A man who has given his heart to sensual pleasure, to the pursuit of many women, to a forbidden woman, or who has taken a foolish or wicked wife, will be compromised in his quest for wisdom, in a manner from which there is no easy recovery.

[3 : 21] In his pursuit of such women, he has been listening to the call of folly herself. Those who have your heart have your devotion, your strength, and ultimately your life. This is one of the reasons why throughout the scripture there is such a concern that the people of God do not marry idolaters and unbelievers.

As the son moves towards young manhood, this question becomes a keen one. He will leave the immediate orbit of his father and mother, and there will be various powerful appeals to and claims upon his heart, principally from women.

The choices that the young man makes in this area may make or break him. Marry in haste, repent at leisure. A person can give their heart to the quest for true understanding in the fear of the Lord, something personified in lady wisdom, or they can give their heart to foolishness, personified in the figure of the woman folly.

However, one does not just give one's heart to the principles of wisdom or folly. One also has to choose the various persons to whom one gives one's heart. If you are going to give your heart to wisdom and to trust, fear, and honour the Lord, that commitment of heart will determine the other people to whom you will give your love and devotion.

The quest for wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. Next, it involves the honouring of parents and then choosing one's companions and those whom you will love. In choosing your companions, you are choosing the path that you are going to walk.

[4 : 42] Once you have chosen such a path, it is not easy to divert from it. For this reason, the father is very concerned that his son be alert to the forking paths that he will encounter.

He wants to signpost their destinations, so that the son's decisions won't be determined by his desires in the moment alone. The taking of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was a decision made on account of the fruit's appealing and promising qualities, and the deceptive words of the serpent.

The forbidden woman will appear to the young man in a similarly attractive guise, and with many of the same deceptive words. She will mask her deathly aftertaste. If the son is able to understand the incipience of the sin of adultery, in all of its deceptive seduction, and connect this with its bitter end, he will be well forearmed against the forbidden woman when he encounters her.

In the book of Proverbs, we move beyond the bare prohibitions of the law and are given a more descriptive account of sin. One of the arenas in which wisdom is most demonstrated is in knowledge of the ways that sin operates, and shrewd avoidance of it in all of its forms.

Wisdom is one of our greatest weapons against sin. It helps us to recognise its paths and its dynamics more readily. It makes it easier for us to avoid them. It enables us to develop strategies of avoidance, evasion, resistance, and preparation that make it less likely that we will find ourselves unwittingly wandering into struggles against sin on its own favoured ground.

[6 : 10] Chapter 7 opens with another charge to the son to devote his heart to the teaching of his father and to wisdom. It will only be with such a devoted heart that the son will be prepared to withstand the temptation of the adulterous woman.

Once again, the language here evokes the relationship that Israel was to have with the law of the Lord, the commandment and wisdom of its heavenly father. Another body of instruction that called for the love and the hearts of the people.

The purpose of devotion to the commandment is protective. The time will soon come when the words of the father compete with the smooth words of the forbidden woman for the son's obedience. If the words of the father have merely been for the son an unwelcome and onerous external constraint, he will soon shrug them off when the attractive adulterous crosses his path.

However, if he has delighted in the words of his father, internalised them in memory and in understanding, meditated upon them to the point of developing his own insight, and formed his own personal relationship to wisdom through them, he will not abandon them when his father is absent.

Once again, we should remember the failure of Adam and Eve in this same area, and the way that their failure to trust and obey their heavenly father, and to consider the goodness of his commandment, made them susceptible to the serpent's wiles.

[7 : 25] The serpent's temptation began with the insinuation that the commandment of the Lord was not good, that the Lord was fundamentally withholding and legalistically restrictive towards his children.

And once Eve was persuaded that goodness was to be found outside of the commandment of the Lord, the course was set. The father paints the picture for the son. He has witnessed this playing out with a gullible young man, and he wants to ensure that his son is not caught in the same snare, so he gives his son an elaborate cautionary tale.

The father, as a wise man, is a person who observes people and their actions. He has learned to size people up, to discern the causes of their different outcomes, and to recognize some of the traits that betray their true character.

On one occasion, he looked through the wooden shutters, or the lattice of his window, and witnessed a scene playing out on the street below. The figure he sees is a young man among the sons.

This is someone in his own son's position and time of life. This young man is not going directly to the house of the adulterous woman. Rather, he's aimlessly and carelessly striding by the corner where such women would most likely be found.

[8 : 33] He's the equivalent of a sinful youth wandering through the red light district. He is doing so in the darkening time of the dusk, when the danger of the temptation is at its keenest. The father's painting of the scene lingers over and accents certain details.

He wants his son to recognize what is likely a willful incaution on the part of the gullible young man. The wise person is alert to the dangers of temptation, and is very careful to avoid encountering them on the ground where they are the strongest.

While it may not be a sin in and of itself to walk by the corner that the prostitute is on at dusk, it is often an indication of at least gullibility, but more likely also a willful and hence sinful resistance to the warnings of wisdom.

The wise man, in his struggles with sin, is very wary of the occasions where temptation's strength is keenest. Perhaps it is certain company. Perhaps it is when he is in solitude.

Perhaps it is when he is tired or in a mood to self-pity. Perhaps it is when he is aimlessly killing time online. The wise man recognizes that sin is like fire.

[9 : 38] It requires fuel, heat and oxygen. He is very mindful of those places where there is fuel for sin, where sinful activities are near at hand, where willing companions in sin might be found.

He is alert to those places where the heat of sin is present, those times and places and persons around which or around whom he feels his sinful passions aroused.

He recognizes the forms of oxygen that sin can be given, privacy and secrecy, excessive or unchecked power, and other such things. The fuel, the heat and the oxygen that sin require are often not sinful things in and of themselves, but the wise person recognizes the danger of a culpable negligence when negotiating their interactions.

For the young man in the father's account, the temptation comes quickly upon him. He didn't go seeking for her, but he foolishly put himself in danger's path. The suddenness of the woman's arrival, the way that she comes upon the unprepared young man, is conveyed in the words, and behold, all at once she is there.

And when she is there, she doesn't just quietly present herself to the man. She takes him by surprise. She throws him off his balance. She presses and cajoles him. She grabs him and kisses him.

[10 : 51] If the young man lingers a moment more, the trap that has been sprung will be impossible for him to escape. Sin isn't waiting around, asking for his permission. Nothing short of firm resistance and running away will deliver him.

We might here recall the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. The father was attentive to the gullible young man. He was also attentive to the appearance, character, and behavior of the woman.

Her dress communicates something of her moral character and intent. She is dressed like a harlot, flaunting her body, using such a display to arouse the man's lust, so that the heat of his passions might meet the fuel of her sinful intent.

Her dress is designed to weaken his resistance. The father can see that she is cunning and streetwise. She is a shrewd judge of the foolish man's nature. She knows just how to catch him.

In the description of her as watchful or wily, we have a window into a reason why wisdom is so essential. The wicked have their own forms of wisdom and cunning. They also have insight into the world and into human behavior.

[11 : 52] The serpent was more crafty than any of the other beasts, and sinful people like this woman are shrewd, skilled at deceiving, trapping, and outwitting others. Faced with many serpents seeking to deceive, tempt, and devour us, we need to have a wisdom that matches theirs, by which we will be able to escape them.

In our battle against sin, a simple goodness, the innocence of infants, is not enough. When battling against sin in our lives, we shouldn't merely be flexing our moral muscles. We should also be using our wits and wisdom to avoid stumbling into temptation, to forearm ourselves for when it comes upon us, to know when and where to expect it, to ensure that we face it on the firmest footing we can.

When our minds are at their clearest, we should be developing plans to tackle sin, temptation, and testing in our lives. We need to plan and prepare for crisis before the crisis hits.

The father continues his description of the adulteress and her manner. She is loud and unruly, someone who is manifestly driven by passions and not self-controlled. Her feet do not stay at home.

She is restless and unsettled. This is seen in the way that she wanders and lurks all over town, in the street, in the market, at the corner. Wherever gullible young men might aimlessly be making their way, she is prowling and waiting to pounce, hoping to divert them.

[13 : 11] She is shameless and brazen, seeking to overcome the young man with the boldness of her seduction. Any hesitation on the man's part, any indecision he might flirt with, will be ruthlessly exploited by her.

In verses 14 to 20, the father records her appeal to the young man. She tells a tale to him. She presents herself as a devotee of a Canaanite fertility cult. She has made communion sacrifices and would have food in her house.

The rituals would be consummated in sexual relations. She has set everything up. She has prepared her bed with the finest sheets and with costly perfumes. All she needs is a young man to share it with.

She flatters the young man by giving the impression that he is exactly the man for whom she was looking. She has eagerly sought him. He isn't like the others. What great fortune that she has found him.

She paints an alluring picture. He can stay with her all night without fear. They can enjoy each other all night without worrying about being caught. Further to assure him, she tells him that her husband has gone away on a long journey.

[14 : 13] He is far away. He plans to stay away for a long and definite period. He has taken money with him, so he is clearly on a business trip. This sin is all the more attractive because it has no consequences attached.

The man is now hooked, and all that the woman needs to do is to reel him in. She turns him aside from the way with her speech, aside from his actual path, but also from the path of righteousness.

She speaks smoothly, but that speech compels or forcibly drives him. The father compares the gullible young man to a doomed animal. He's trapped, but he doesn't yet fully appreciate the severity of his situation.

He doesn't realize that he is about to be killed. Having painted this extended portrait of the forbidden woman, the father concludes by underlining the importance of attention to his words once again, with the same note of urgency with which he began this speech.

The forbidden woman is an apex predator. Countless men have fallen into her clutches. Her house is like a den filled with dead men's bones, and those who venture into it will find that it is dark, crooked, and that its uneven paths descend to Sheol itself.

[15 : 21] The son is cautioned to guard his heart and his feet against straying into her ways. He must be respectful of the danger that she represents, and give her an extremely wide berth.

A question to consider. Looking at our own lives in terms of the factors that invite the fires of sin, what are the areas of greatest danger, and what are some concrete steps that we personally can take to reduce this danger in our own lives?