

Proverbs 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 5 My son, be attentive to my wisdom, incline your ear to my understanding, that you may keep discretion, and your lips may guard knowledge.
- For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil. But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, her steps follow the path to Sheol.
- She does not ponder the path of life, her ways wander, and she does not know it. And now, O sons, listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth.
- Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house. Lest you give your honour to others, and your years to the merciless. Lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labours go to the house of a foreigner.
- And at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, and you say, How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof. I did not listen to the voice of my teachers, or incline my ear to my instructors.
- [1 : 0 5] I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation. Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets.
- Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. A lovely dear, a graceful doe.
- Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight. Be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman, and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
- For a man's ways are before the eyes of the Lord, and he ponders all his paths. The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.
- Proverbs chapter 5 contains the eighth speech of the father to the son. The father gave a more general warning about wicked men and adulterous women in the prologue, but in these chapters, those earlier warnings are elaborated.
- [2 : 1 4] Much of chapters 5 to 7 are devoted to warning the son against the adulterous woman in particular. She represents one of the greatest temptations, and the greatest dangers that he faces.
- The chapter opens with an exhortation to the son to be attentive, addressing the son as a listener. In verse 2, the father declares that the purpose of the attentive ear are the well-mastered lips.
- The statement here is similar to that of Malachi chapter 2 verse 7. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.
- The lips of the well-taught son will be discreet and will guard knowledge. As we see elsewhere in the book of Proverbs, and in Scripture more generally, a person's speech is powerfully indicative of their wisdom or their lack of it.

The lips of a wise son are immediately contrasted with the lips of the forbidden woman. The wise son's lips guard knowledge. The forbidden woman's lips drip honey. The dripping honeyed lips of the forbidden woman, and the smoothness of her palate, are perhaps intended to evoke the ease with which careless intercourse with the forbidden woman can move from seductive conversation to kisses and beyond.

[3 : 27] The language of dripping lips, while primarily having to do with seductive speech at this point, is elsewhere connected with sensual kisses. In places like Song of Solomon, chapter 4 verse 11.

Your lips drip nectar, my bride. Honey and milk are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon. The fool is especially susceptible to the sweet speech of the adulteress.

The fool's pride makes him vulnerable to flattery. Hating rebuke, he has never gained perspective upon himself. And the flattery that the adulteress gives is the perfect bait to hook him.

It tells him what he wants to believe about himself. And fools are driven more by what they want to believe than by any desire for the actual truth. Here the father warns that the sweetness and smoothness of the adulterous woman's words are profoundly deceptive.

Those who take her bait will discover that the consequences of doing so are exceedingly bitter. And for all of their apparent softness and smoothness, her words are as deadly and sharp as a two-edged sword.

[4 : 30] Once again, the metaphor of the way comes up. Walking on the way of wisdom is not just about guarding your own steps, but about the company that you choose to keep. The way of the forbidden woman is descending into destruction and death, moving away from the light into enveloping darkness, and those who associate with her will end up walking the same path.

She is unmindful of and blind to her path. Those who follow her are doomed to share her fate. The picture is further developed in chapter 7, which concludes with the following warning in verses 25 to 27.

Let not your heart turn aside to her ways. Do not stray into her paths. For many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death.

The father gives his sons the most solemn warning against this woman, expounding upon some of the reasons why she is so dangerous. The man who gets carelessly involved with the adulterous woman will find himself at the mercy of an angry husband and family, who will mercilessly bleed him dry.

At that point he will be left with futile remorse, as his resources and his energies are depleted, and he is finally ruined and utterly shamed within his community, his house and his reputation in tatters.

[5 : 47] The warning here can be generalised to sexual immorality more generally, which wastes countless lives. The careless young man may lose years of his life and his greatest future in promiscuity, squandering the first fruits of his strength and resources on women who would happily devour him whole.

We can imagine such a person in his late 30s and 40s. He has had many broken relationships. He is paying support for children from whom he is alienated. He has had a costly divorce.

He has wasted money on prostitutes or on his porn addiction. He is lonely, bitter and jaded. He has a few STDs. He is unable to connect with women in any emotionally healthy manner, and the best years of his life and the greatest of his energies and vigour are behind him.

He has little honour in society. People regard him as a disreputable failure. If only he had listened to the warnings when he had the chance. The accumulated bitter blows of life beat awareness of the folly of his chosen path into the careless son.

However, the wise son does not have to learn lessons the hard way. By heeding the warnings of his father, the benefits of the wisdom of the previous generation can be enjoyed by the next, with the son knowing little of the painful costs that he would otherwise have incurred, had he needed to experience the fate that his father warns him about in order to obtain that knowledge.

[7 : 07] The alternative to the folly of pursuing the adulterous woman is fidelity and chastity in marriage. Within much of the Old Testament, sexual relations are focused upon procreation.

However, within the wisdom literature, sexual relations are a source of delight and pleasure. How a man handles his sex drive is a primary testing ground for wisdom. Folly in this area can be devastating, but a wise man who orders his sexual desire solely, but fully towards one woman, is promised preservation from the dissipation that afflicts the unchaste, and joy and delight in physical relations with his wife.

While the promiscuous man is depleted and consumed by his dissipation, the faithful man enjoys a sort of rejuvenation in the play of sexual union with the wife of his youth. Sexual relations here are described using metaphors of drinking, flowing waters, fountains, and love is spoken of as something that can intoxicate the one who imbibes it.

In scripture, women are frequently associated with wells. Rebecca, Rachel and Zipporah were all met at wells. Wells are symbols of life, refreshment and fertility.

A fountain or a well can create a realm of life around it. The Song of Solomon, chapter 4, verses 12 to 16, employs this imagery to speak about the bride. A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed.

[8 : 32] Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all choice spices, a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.

Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind, blow upon my garden, let its spices flow, let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits. The foolish man wanders from promiscuous woman to promiscuous woman.

His springs are scattered, their waters flow in the streets, where the prostitutes sell their bodies. Rather than fountains that could sustain a glorious garden, these fountains have their waters wasted on the ground.

Instead of this, the wise son should devote himself to one woman, to whom he is exclusively committed, a well that is his alone. He is to be intoxicated with the love of his wife, having eyes for her alone, sensually delighting in her body, and rejoicing in and enjoying her.

It is important to attend to the metaphors here, flowing fresh water and intoxication. Sexuality is something in which life and energies flow between people.

[9 : 46] Sexuality is something that causes us to lower our guards, to relax and to open up, like we might when drinking alcohol. This is what sexuality is supposed to involve.

Such sex is not safe. In such sex, you are dropping your defences, opening yourself up, and allowing something of your life to flow to another person. Indeed, the things that make sex unsafe are the very things that make sex so good.

When we read the seventh commandment, you shall not commit adultery, we may merely hear the prohibition. However, much of the purpose of the wisdom literature is to acquaint us with the rationale, with the goodness and wisdom of the commandment.

Waters can flow out, bringing life and fruitfulness. Such a man can enjoy the blessing of profound emotional openness with, and exposure to a woman. He can drink fully of her love, without being afraid of losing his wits and being destroyed by her.

However, intoxication and waters flowing in sexual relations are unavoidable. Even if no STDs are spread, and the contraception works, men will still expend their sexual vigour, their emotional energies, much of their wealth and years of their lives, on women, who may be open springs, when they might have given themselves fully to one woman, and delighted in her without reservation or guardedness.

The promiscuous man can never really relate fully to, or unreservedly enjoy, any woman, because he is pursuing sexual pleasure against its grain, against the union and mutual lowering of defences that it naturally involves.

[12 : 17] Our paths are all overseen by the Lord, who upholds the moral order of the world. In this moral order, sin's judgments generally follow from it as a natural consequence.

A question to consider. How might this passage inform our reading of Song of Solomon as wisdom literature?

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