

Proverbs 28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 28. The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion. When a land transgresses, it has many rulers, but with a man of understanding and knowledge, its stability will long continue. A poor man who oppresses the poor is a beating rain that leaves no food. Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law strive against them. Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely.

Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a rich man who is crooked in his ways. The one who keeps the law is a son with understanding, but a companion of gluttons shames his father. Whoever multiplies his wealth by interest and profit gathers it for him who is generous to the poor. If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination. Whoever misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit, but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance. A rich man is wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has understanding will find him out. When the righteous triumph, there is great glory, but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves. Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. Blessed is the one who fears the Lord always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity. Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people. A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor, but he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days. If one is burdened with the blood of another, he will be a fugitive until death. Let no one help him. Whoever walks in integrity will be delivered, but he who is crooked in his ways will suddenly fall.

Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty. A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished.

To show partiality is not good, but for a piece of bread a man will do wrong. A stingy man hastens after wealth and does not know that poverty will come upon him. Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue. Whoever robs his father or his mother and says, that is no transgression, is a companion to a man who destroys. A greedy man stirs up strife, but the one who trusts in the Lord will be enriched. Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered. Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse. When the wicked rise, people hide themselves, but when they perish, the righteous increase.

Proverbs chapter 28 opens with a contrast between the righteous and the wicked. The wicked are here described as paranoid. They are those people who, as a result of their guilty conscience, always find themselves furtively looking over their shoulder, hoping that justice has not caught up with them. The righteous, by contrast, have a boldness that comes from their innocence and their trust in the Lord, knowing that the Lord is in control of all things and that they have committed their paths to him. They can act without the fear of those who are trying to escape the Lord's moral governance.

[3 : 42] The description of the wicked as fleeing when no one pursues is one of the curses of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26 verse 17. Guilt has an innovating effect on a people, while being in right standing with the Lord gives a person the confidence to act with true boldness.

Verse 2 describes the political fallout experienced by a nation that transgresses the word of the Lord. They are afflicted by a multitude of rulers. We might speculate as to the reason why this is the case.

Perhaps this is a consequence of the fact that when people reject the law of the Lord as a standard for what is right and wrong, things boil down to mere power, and there are many people who will compete for that. The righteous and the wise ruler, by contrast, seeks to uphold the law, and as a result, he can appeal to a principle of order that has a greater potential for securing consensus than mere power. Such a kingdom built upon righteousness and the law of the Lord will be inherently more secure and enduring. Elsewhere in Proverbs, the king is compared to rains. In verse 3, however, we have a poor man who's compared to a beating rain, a rain that destroys crops and washes away the soil, rather than actually bringing any benefit. This might be a description of the destitute tyrant. Alternatively, it might be a description of the poor and mean people of the land, who mistreat and oppress their own neighbours and people of their own class. The righteous and the wicked are not merely concerned with their own moral actions, but with the status of the moral discourse of the nation as a whole. Those who rebel against the law of the Lord are not merely doing it for their own sake. They want to see wickedness prosper more generally, so they'll throw in their weight to praise wickedness when at all possible. The righteous, for their part, are not just interested in private morality, but want to see truth and justice triumph. As a result, they will actively campaign against evil when they can, and not merely be passive towards it. Wicked persons do not merely have a failure in their action, they have a fundamental inability to perceive justice as it actually is.

Their view of the world is distorted and twisted, and they act accordingly. The righteous, however, understand the fundamental grain of the universe, which is that of justice, and act in accordance with it.

It is better to be a poor man who acts in such a manner, than the rich man in his seeming prosperity who has acted otherwise. Once again in verse 7 we see that the behaviour of sons reflects upon their fathers. The son who is attentive to and understands the law is a son who brings pride and strength to his father. By contrast, the son who gives himself to the way of folly and gluttony causes shame to his father, and also, far from strengthening his father, leaves his father weaker. Scripture has several warnings against the practice of usury and the charging of interest on charitable loans. Verse 8 is another example of this. Exodus chapter 22 verse 25 reads, If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him.

[6 : 50] Leviticus chapter 25 verses 35 to 36, If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. We are assured here that the person who gathers interest in that way from the poor will end up losing it to the person who is generous to the poor. The Lord declares himself to be the protector of the poor, the one who acts as their guarantor. He who gives to the poor lends to the Lord, and then also the one who will establish the dynamics of a righteous economy. In Deuteronomy chapter 15 we see a number of examples of this. In verse 6 of that chapter, For the Lord your God will bless you as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you. The blessing here is described as something directly established by the Lord. Again in verses 9 to 10 of that chapter, Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart, and you say, The seventh year, the year of release is near, and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cried to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work, and in all that you undertake.

Those who give themselves to the way of wickedness, and reject the law of the Lord, do not win favour with God with their sacrifices or their prayers. Even their supposed acts of piety and worship are acts that are abominations to the Lord. For prayer and sacrifice to be acceptable to the Lord, there has to be a consistency of life and of worship. Verse 10 describes a situation where the righteous are led into an evil way. We might speculate about the sort of situation that is in view here. Perhaps it is a situation where due to their naivety or their ignorance, the righteous are being led into wickedness against their knowledge. Alternatively, it might be a situation where the wicked are seducing the righteous to evil, delighting and leading them into sin. A number of proverbs in the book have described the danger of wisdom in one's own eyes. Such wisdom in one's own eyes is a particular form of folly. It is characterised by pride and hubris, and a failure to appreciate the limitations of your knowledge. As we saw in verse 6, wisdom is not the preserve of the rich.

There are many people who are poor who have great wisdom, and they will be able to see through rich people who are puffed up in their own perception, believing themselves to be wise when they are nothing of the kind. Verse 12, as Michael Fox observes, is similar to a number of other verses in the context. Chapter 28, verse 28, chapter 29, verse 2, and chapter 29, verse 16. He points out that they could be read as a cluster. When the righteous triumph, there is great glory. But when the wicked rise, people hide themselves. When the wicked rise, people hide themselves. But when they perish, the righteous increase. When the righteous increase, the people rejoice. But when the wicked rule, the people groan. When the wicked increase, transgression increases. But the righteous will look upon their downfall. The apparent progression between these proverbs suggests that their ordering is not accidental, and that they are not just merely repetition. Once again, they concern the larger ramifications for society in the relative fortunes of the righteous and the wicked. The righteous and the wicked are not just individuals, but represent the success of their various principles. When the wicked increase, wickedness and the disorder and the tyranny that that involves increases. When the righteous increase, righteousness increases. Peace, justice, and good order. This is one of the reasons why the justice of the law courts is so important. Justice needs to be seen to be done. And as it is seen to be done, the righteous will be encouraged and heartened throughout the society. The confession of sins and repentance is not actually a common theme in the book of Proverbs. In verse 13, we encounter a statement that is very similar to those that we find elsewhere in scripture. For instance, in Psalm 32, verse 5,

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Fearing the Lord and taking sin, and the dangers that are associated with it seriously, will protect a person from harm, whereas the person who hardens his heart to sin and to the word of the Lord invites disaster for himself. In chapter 19, verse 12, the king was likened to a growling lion. A king's wrath is like the growling of a lion, but his favour is like dew on the grass. Also in Proverbs, chapter 20, verse 2, The wicked and oppressive king is also like a lion, but he devours, tyrannises, and oppresses his people, leaving them in a very sorry state. Verses 16 to 18, however, speak about the way that such oppressors and those who have committed injustice are actually inviting their own doom. Their oppression does not actually lead them to prosper. Rather, it manifests their lack of understanding. It dooms them to death, and they can face sudden downfall. Proverbs chapter 1, verse 19 makes a similar point. Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain. It takes away the life of its possessors. Verse 19 repeats the claim of chapter 12, verse 11. Various schemes for easy money, to get rich quick, are inadvisable, and their likely consequence will be poverty. Far better to adopt the path of diligence, and to earn lasting riches in an effective way. Such hastening to be rich can also be seen in pursuit of injustice. The son who throws in his lot with the brigands, for instance. There are various warnings against partiality and judgment in scripture, and a number in the book of Proverbs also. In reading verse 21, we might be reminded of

Exodus chapter 23, verses 2 to 3. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit siding with the many, so as to pervert justice. Nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit. Several commentators have argued that what's taking place in verse 21 is bread being given as a sort of bribe, and as a result, justice going astray. However, it is more likely that this is describing a mitigating circumstance that should lead the righteous judge to deliver a judgment that's tempered more by mercy, in the case of someone who has committed a crime out of the desperation of his poverty. The man who pursues riches hastily, with folly and injustice, will find that poverty pursues him. The righteous man who cares for his neighbour is prepared to rebuke him. Faithful are the wounds of such a friend. Indeed, such a person may find that he is more honoured as a friend in the future. By contrast, the value of the flatterer's friendship can rapidly depreciate. Those who merely tell their friends what they want to hear will consistently lose the friendship of wise people over time.

[13 : 44] Verse 24 speaks to a situation where a son dishonours his father and mother, perhaps in seeking to secure the inheritance before they have died and to drive them off it. We find a similar statement in chapter 19 verse 26. He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach. In speaking to the religious leaders of his day, Jesus speaks to another form of dishonouring of parents that fits this description. In Mark chapter 7 verses 19 to 13. And he said to them, you have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.

For Moses said, honour your father and your mother and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, if a man tells his father or his mother, whatever you would have gained from me is korban, that is given to God, then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother.

Thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down, and many such things you do. Verses 25 to 27 give us three examples of contrasts between people who will prosper and people who will fail. The contrasts in some cases are inexact, inviting us to reflect upon some of the features that could fill them out. For instance, in verse 25, the greedy man stirs up strife, but the one who trusts in the Lord will be enriched. The implication is that the one who trusts in the Lord is also a man of peace, whereas the greedy man does not trust in the Lord and despite pursuing riches is not ultimately enriched. Verse 28, with which the chapter ends, relates to verse 12, and we discussed it in that connection. Like that verse, it describes the larger social consequences of the prospering of the righteous or the wicked. When the wicked prosper, the entire society suffers, and the righteous may even find themselves driven into hiding.

A question to consider. We have noted the connection between verses 12 and 28 of this chapter, and verses 2 and 16 of the chapter that follows. What can we learn by comparing these verses, and by reading them in their succession?

