

Proverbs 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 23 Do not desire his delicacies, for he is like one who is inwardly calculating.

Eat and drink, he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten, and waste your pleasant words. Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words.

Do not move an ancient landmark, or enter the fields of the fatherless, for their Redeemer is strong, he will plead their cause against you. Apply your heart to instruction, and your ear to words of knowledge.

Do not withhold discipline from a child. If you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with a rod, you will save his soul from Sheol. My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad.

My inmost being will exult, when your lips speak what is right. Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day. Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off.

[1 : 3 2] Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way. Be not among drunkards, or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags.

Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy truth, and do not sell it. Buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding. The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice.

He who fathers a wise son will be glad in him. Let your father and mother be glad. Let her who bore you rejoice. My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.

For a prostitute is a deep pit, and adulteress is a narrow well. She lies in wait like a robber, and increases the traitors among mankind. Who has woe?

Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine. Those who go to try mixed wine.

[2 : 3 4] Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things.

You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. They struck me, you will say, but I was not hurt. They beat me, but I did not feel it.

When shall I awake? I must have another drink. In the Gospels, Jesus often sets his teaching concerning the disciples' proper behaviour in the context of feasts.

Such feasts were contexts in which group membership, inclusion and exclusion, one's place in the social order, and all these other things were very much in view. Everyone would want a place of honour at the table, and some people, being proud, might assume a place that exceeded their status, and end up being humbled by being told to sit down lower.

The subordinate invited to a meal, in verses 1-3 of chapter 23 of Proverbs, is in a similar position. He needs to bear in mind that the meal table is not merely a place for satisfying appetites.

- [3 : 45] It is a place where the ruler who is the host will be testing and judging his guests. If he is unable to master his appetites in that context, the ruler will certainly be paying attention.

The saying that follows in verses 4-5 warns against a too eager pursuit of wealth. Perhaps this would lead people into unrighteous behaviour, like robbery and other things like that.

The warning is that such wealth does not last. It does not offer the certainty that people think. Marth and Russ corrupt, and thieves break in and steal. The wealth, to use the analogy here, sprouts wings and flies off.

This section, like many of those that surround it, excerpts a series of statements in the same order as they are found in the Egyptian book, the instructions of a menomope. However, whereas the image that is used in a menomope is that of a goose, here in Proverbs it is that of an eagle.

The wise person is prudent with wealth, but he does not pursue it in the same way as others, giving himself to it entirely. Wealth is fickle. It is like a vapour. It can vanish.

- [4 : 47] It is insubstantial. True wealth is found in pursuing wisdom. Those who pursue wisdom more directly will often find that it is attended by the blessings of honour and riches.

Verses 6-8 bring another warning about behaviour at meals. Here it concerns the begrudging host. While the begrudging host may offer things as a matter of social formality, he does not really want to share his wealth or invite people to his table.

Although on the surface he may show the expected politeness and hospitality, in his heart he is deeply resentful and his words are merely hypocritical. Accepting such a man's invitation and eating his meal will have no effect in improving relations.

All the pleasantries and the compliments that the guest gives will be wasted and the food might as well be vomited back out. Many fools have reached the point where they are so opposed to wisdom that any wisdom declared in their presence will merely solidify them in their folly.

They will react against it. They will double down in their errors. In such situations, it may be better not to speak any wisdom in the presence of the fool at all, rather than confirming him in his folly.

- [5 : 55] Being alert to the degree to which people are teachable is an important aspect of wisdom. If you are not careful, you may be placing pearls before swine. The warning of verses 10-11 is very similar to that found a few verses earlier.

In chapter 22, verse 28, Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set. At this point, the focus is more explicitly upon those who are fatherless, persons who are vulnerable to exploitation, who lack the defence that a father or husband would give.

The warning here goes back to places like Deuteronomy chapter 19, verse 14. You shall not move your neighbour's landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess.

Verse 12 is an exhortation to application of one's heart and attentiveness of one's ear. Wisdom does not just get passively absorbed. You have to devote yourself to searching it out.

It requires discipline and it requires diligence. It requires a disposition of the heart and of the body's functions. The heart that is inclined to instruction will be a humble heart, a heart that loves the truth and will pursue it wherever it is to be found.

[7 : 05] Verses 13-14 bring another encouragement to discipline children. The striking with the rod here should not be limited to merely corporal punishment. Symbolically, it would include all the different modes of parental correction.

The meaning of verse 13 is not that the rod won't kill the child, but rather that proper parental discipline will save such a child from death. This is confirmed by the verse that follows.

A child that has been well disciplined early on will be set on the right path and in the long term such a child will avoid the far more painful and indeed deathly consequences of folly.

A son who has been receptive to such discipline and who has grown in wisdom will be a cause of pride for his parents. They will delight in his wisdom and they will be honoured by it. This, of course, should be a further inducement to the son to devote himself to wisdom's way.

Psalms 37 verses 1-6 exhorts us, Fret not yourself because of evildoers. Be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.

[8 : 07] Trust in the Lord and do good. Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord.

Trust in him and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday. Faced with the seeming prosperity of the wicked, Like the psalmist, it is very easy for one's foot to slip, to be tempted to envy them.

Yet trusting in the Lord, living by faith, not by sight, you can continue in the fear of the Lord, knowing that their final outcome will not be good. However, even if they currently suffer poverty and oppression, the righteous will finally be vindicated.

Their hope will not be cut off. The conclusion of this chapter from verses 19-35 is mostly concerned with avoiding the sinful and decadent excesses of appetite.

These verses begin with a warning against keeping bad company. The paradigmatic rebellious son in Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 20 is a drunkard and a glutton. Here the son is warned against keeping company with such people.

[9 : 11] Their fate, as long as they continue in that path, is apparent. They will squander what wealth they have and they will end up in poverty. Their vigor and their motivation will soon escape them. Drunkards become sluggards and as a result become poor.

Those who keep their company will share their destiny. Observance of the fifth commandment is a great protection against all of this. The honouring of father and mother is a great pillar of the house of wisdom.

In this honouring, a son looks back to his origins. He recognises that he has come from his mother and father. It is also a lifelong honouring. The son must continue to honour his father and mother, even when they are old, when their mental and physical faculties might start to fail them.

This honouring would include things like providing for them, taking them into his house, and developing and maintaining a character that reflects well upon them. The exhortation here to pursue wisdom is similar to that found in Proverbs chapter 4 verses 5 to 7.

Having already warned the son against the company of gluttons and drunkards in verses 19 to 21.

[10 : 30] In verses 26 to 28, the son is warned against the prostitute and the adulterous woman. Such warnings are common in the book of Proverbs. The adulterous woman is someone whose ways lead down to death.

Her mouth is compared to a pit that someone can fall into. Here, the prostitute and the adulterous are compared to a deep pit and a narrow well. Such imagery for women is found at various points in Scripture.

Elsewhere in Proverbs, it can be seen in chapter 5 verses 15 to 20. 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 adulterous? Michael Fox also raised the possibility that the deep pit and the narrow well may also be a euphemistic way of speaking of the woman's sexual organs.

[11 : 39] Proverbs chapter 22 verse 14 read, The mouth of forbidden women is a deep pit. He with whom the Lord is angry will fall into it. The powerful temptations of the woman's seductive mouth and the allure of her hidden sexual parts are disclosed in their true character here.

In the case of the prostitute or the adulterous woman, these are deep pits. They're wells that someone can fall into and never be able to get out again. In some cases, folly can be clearly perceived, and one of the powerful ways to warn against such folly is by lampooning the foolish.

Verses 29 to 35 contain such ridicule of the foolish drunkard. The one who has given himself to wine is not a happy person. He has sorrow and woe, and has constant conflict.

He's complaining and grumbling. He has bloodshot eyes. He and his companions hunch over their wine, inspecting it, swirling it in the cup, looking at their reflections in the glass.

He delights in all of its sensuous qualities, its colour, its taste, the way that it swirls, the way that it goes down so smoothly. Yet it acts like a deceptive serpent to him.

[12 : 44] It makes him look foolish. He sees things that aren't there. He engages in coarse, drunken speech. When he lies down, he's like a landlubber at sea, like someone on the top of a mast of a vessel during a storm at sea, the floor that he's lying on reeling beneath him.

Although he hasn't been in a fight, he'll wake up the next morning feeling as if he had. But even despite all of the ways that drink is making a fool of him, the only thought that he has when he comes to his senses is where the next drink is coming from.

A question to consider. This chapter speaks a lot about the dangers of being mastered by one's appetites. What does a healthy way of relating to one's appetites look like? What are some of the practices by which appetites can be better mastered?