

Proverbs 24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 24 Be not envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them, for their hearts devise violence, and their lips talk of trouble.

By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established. By knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counsellors there is victory.

Wisdom is too high for a fool, in the gate he does not open his mouth. Whoever plans to do evil will be called a schemer. The devising of folly is sin, and the scoffer is an abomination to mankind.

If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small. Rescue those who are being taken away to death. Hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, Behold, we did not know this, does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?

Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it? And will he not repay man according to his work? My son, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste.

[1 : 17] Know that wisdom is such to your soul. If you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off. Lie not in wait as a wicked man against the dwelling of the righteous. Do no violence to his home.

For the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity. Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.

Fret not yourself because of evildoers, and be not envious of the wicked. For the evil man has no future. The lamp of the wicked will be put out. My son, fear the Lord and the King, and do not join with those who do otherwise.

For disaster will arise suddenly from them, and who knows the ruin that will come from them both. These also are sayings of the wise. Partiality and judging is not good.

Whoever says to the wicked, you are in the right, will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations. But those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them.

[2 : 27] Whoever gives an honest answer kisses the lips. Prepare your work outside, get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house.

Be not a witness against your neighbour without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. Do not say, I will do to him as he has done to me. I will pay the man back for what he has done.

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns. The ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down.

Then I saw and considered it. I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

Proverbs chapter 24 begins with a warning against envying evil men. The righteous man should neither envy such men, nor desire to enter into their company. The temptation would be their seeming prosperity.

[3 : 31] While it can be very easy to read the book of Proverbs as a book of empirical observations, at such points we see that it is very much about living by faith. The righteous man in such a situation needs to beware of living by sight.

He needs to recognize the character of evil men, and their final fate. The temptation to envy evil men is one that we see elsewhere in scripture. For instance, in Psalm 37 verses 1-2, 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. And in Psalm 73 verses 1-5, Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death.

Their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are. They are not stricken like the rest of mankind. The true foundation of a household is not in the might nor in the wealth of its master, but rather in wisdom.

[4 : 35] The wise person establishes his household with wisdom and understanding, and it is with knowledge that the house is not only formed, but also filled with all of its glories. In chapter 31 we'll read the description of the wise woman who establishes her house in such a manner.

It is easy to focus upon might and upon bravery when we think about the problems that face us in our world. If only we had the courage and the strength, we could overcome the obstacles that we face.

In verses 5 and 6, however, we are instructed to think of wisdom as a source of great strength. It is by wisdom that effective war is waged, that great plans are effected.

Proverbs chapter 20 verse 18 Plans are established by counsel. By wise guidance wage war. Effective counsel is found in the multitude of counsellors.

By getting many minds together on a particular problem, testing their positions against each other, and weighing up many different suggested courses of action, you'll have the best preparation for determining a prudent course.

[5 : 36] Proverbs chapter 15 verse 22 Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed. We ought to attend to the discussion of wisdom here as a source of great might.

There is a certain type of man of action that can fret at the deliberations of the wise. They are fed up of all of the talking and just want to get into the fray. Listening to counsellors just complicates the mission.

Far better not to have to weigh the voices of many different counsellors, and just to have a very clear course of action and stick to it. However, much of the strength of war is found in wisdom, not in mere brute force.

The victor will be the person who can hold back the passions of the warrior for long enough to deliberate wisely concerning the course of action to take. Likewise, in all other areas of our lives, if we are going to be people of strength, we must be wise people.

A focus on might and bravery and action that dispenses with wisdom is not going to be mighty at all. The fool cannot master wisdom, nor can he understand it. And as a result, in the gate, in the place of rule within the city, he is silenced, he is unable to speak effectively, because he lacks the wisdom with which to do so.

[6 : 45] Once again, we see that the fool is rendered impotent by his folly. It is the wise man who is strong and effective in his action. Verses 8 to 9 continue the theme of planning, but here it is the devising of sin.

Such wicked schemers and scoffers end up reaping dishonour for themselves, just as the fool is silent in the gate, so they are despised by the members of their society. When the day of adversity comes, people's strength is tested.

Crisis humbles us. It shows us the limits of our strength. It also tests us. It shows our true mettle. A person can boast in times of ease, but when the time of testing comes, then we will see what he is really made of.

One of the ways that we are tested in the day of crisis is in our concern for and willingness to help our neighbour in distress. It is very easy to turn a blind eye, to say like Cain, am I my brother's keeper?

Yet God, who looks after us, expects us to look after our neighbours. The strength and the resources that we have should be used to help and assist others when they need it. If we fail to care for our neighbour, the Lord will judge and repay us according to our deeds.

[7 : 51] In chapter 16 verse 24 we read, Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. Honey is a source of both health and delight.

And in verses 13 to 14, wisdom is compared to such honey. In Psalm 19 verse 10, the word of the Lord is compared to honey. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

Wisdom gives life and health and it should be a source of great delight to us. The rising and falling of different groups of people is the subject of verses 15 to 20.

The hearer is warned against acting against the righteous as a predator. The fall for the righteous man will always be followed by lifting up again. Death followed by resurrection. The wicked, however, when they stumble, they will stumble finally and completely.

Continuing the theme of falling and stumbling, verses 17 and 18 warn us against schadenfreude. A vengeful delight in others' distress can bring the Lord's judgment upon us. Vengeance belongs to the Lord and we should not seek evil against our neighbor in our heart.

[8 : 59] Proverbs chapter 20 verse 22. Do not say, I will repay evil. Wait for the Lord and he will deliver you. Scripture does seem to legitimate a sort of rejoicing when the teeth of the wicked are broken, when wicked people are brought down from their mighty thrones, when oppressors fall into their own snares and the cruel are destroyed.

Nevertheless, we are not to be vengeful in our hearts. While we can rejoice in deliverance and in the justice that God has brought about, we do not take a vindictive delight in others' distress.

A key feature of the righteous is that they are not preoccupied with the wicked. Their eyes are on the Lord. They trust in him. And when they see the wicked prosper, their hearts are not fazed, nor are they obsessed with seeing the wicked's demise.

Schadenfreude and envy are two sides of the same coin and both must be utterly resisted. Verses 19 to 20 return to the theme of envy with which the chapter began. In its specific context here, it needs to be read in juxtaposition to the Schadenfreude of the previous verses.

It also fills out the message of verses 1 and 2, whereas verses 1 and 2 taught that the wicked ought not to be envied on account of their wickedness and their evil actions. Here we are told that we should not envy them because of their demise that will come about.

- [10 : 15] One of the features of the sin of envy is that it prevents us from focusing upon the Lord. In envy we are preoccupied with the state of our neighbour relative to ourselves. However, the righteous man is not preoccupied with his neighbour, either seeking his downfall or envying his success, but rather looks to the Lord with confidence and seeks a blessing from him.

As he is confident the wicked will not finally prosper, he does not focus upon them. He is freed confidently to live a life of contentment, of thanksgiving and generosity. The king has been connected with the Lord at various points in the book of Proverbs.

He is a servant of the Lord to the people. He represents the Lord's wrath against sin and is to uphold justice within the land. The faithful king is a son of God and images the Lord to the people.

We might here recall the way that the Lord and his king are closely associated in places like Psalm 2. The charge here is also related to Exodus chapter 22 verse 28.

You shall not revile God nor curse a ruler of your people. Political authority and divine authority are connected in various ways. Scripture commonly warns against the danger of partiality and judgment.

- [11 : 27] 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.

Deuteronomy chapter 1 verse 17. You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's.

Deuteronomy chapter 16 verse 19. You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality. And you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.

Here we are taught that besides breaking the commandment of the Lord, the person who perverts justice will also be cursed by the people, who will bring dishonor upon himself. Conversely, those who exercise true justice invite blessing upon themselves, presumably both the blessing of the Lord and the blessing of the people around them.

Kissing a person's lips would be a sign of honor and respect. In verse 26, we are shown that true honor and respect is seen in speaking with candor to people. The difficult word, the challenging rebuke, can often be rejected by people.

- [12 : 39] They can feel that it is an attack. But a friend that speaks with candor to you, who truthfully directs you towards wisdom, even when it may cost them to do so, is the real faithful companion.

He's the one who really kisses the lips, rather than the flatterers who will just tell a man what he wants to hear. Verse 27 teaches the importance of doing tasks in their proper time.

The person who abandons the work of the field in order to build his house will find that there is nothing in his field when the time comes for harvest. However, if he attends to first things first, he will be able to have both the house and a fruitful field.

Bearing false witness against a neighbor is the subject of verses 28 to 29. Here, the act of false witness is seen to be motivated by a desire for vengeance. Such a litigious man uses the law as a weapon.

His desire is not justice or deliverance, but revenge and causing hurt to another party. Proverbs chapter 6 verses 9 to 11 read, How long will you lie there, O sluggard?

[13:38] When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

We are given a description of the property of the sluggard. A once fruitful vineyard has fallen into disrepair. It's overgrown with thorns and nettles, and the stone wall that once protected it is now broken down.

All of this is the result of the sluggard's laziness. The accumulation of many small acts of laziness, the little sleep, the little slumber, the little folding of the hands to rest, lead to the progressive deterioration of the sluggard's property.

While the sluggard's movements may be slow, and the fall of his property into ruin may be gradual, when poverty comes, it will come suddenly and unexpectedly, like a robber or a bandit coming upon him.

He will be utterly unprepared. A question to consider. What are the virtues that will help us to avoid either envy or schadenfreude towards the wicked?

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