

The Way of Living Skillful Described:
The Proverbs

Introductory Comments

1. Who wrote the collection?
Several known people contributed to the collection: Solomon (who wrote the majority), Augur, Lemuel, and the anonymous “sayings of the wise.”
2. Who assembled the collection?
We have at least two instances, the time of Solomon and three hundred years later during the religious revival under Hezekiah. We are uncertain of the additions of Augur and Lemuel, as well as the “Sayings of the Wise.”
3. What is a proverb?
It generally consists of a pithy, single verse double line statement that contrasts foolish demeanor with that of wisdom. They are ethical maxims that characterize a skillful lifestyle that are instructional in nature.
4. How did the collection function originally?
It seems that the proverbs were collected for teaching purposes in the royal court to prepare the young for government service.
5. What is the ground upon which skillful choices are made?
The foundation of skillful living is the fear of God, the meaning in this instance, is reverential awe that leads to humility and submission to the transcendent Lord. Charles Bridges, a nineteenth century sage said it his way, “It is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law.”

Because of the non-linear, non-argumentative nature of Proverbs, being frequently parallel contrastive states of wisdom and its opposite, the book is often treated by gathering and commenting on various topics (the exceptions being 1:8-9:18 and chapters 30 and 31). This is the method we will follow as we seek the wisdom of the past for today and our tomorrows.

We increasingly find ourselves in a world that is characterized by anxiety and instability. It is easy in a world of-too-much-coming-at-us through the media, and other sources, to find tranquility in that we have more than we can handle. The net result can be anxiety manifested and rooted in uncertainty, fears, and insecurity. The answer, at least in part, is focus. What we put in our minds is what we involuntarily think. We all need good input in what Dr. Swindoll calls, “a world that has lost its way.” How do we do that? The answer is simple but we are complex. We need to fill our minds with good thoughts that lift us above our fears. What brings us happy, wholesome thoughts “that allows us to lie down in green pastures [peacefulness] leads us beside quiet waters [contentedness], and restores our soul leading us in the path of righteousness for His name’s sake (Ps. 23:1-2).” There are times when we all need to be quiet and refocus.

This is the purpose of the proverbs. It is to give us a glimpse beyond the immediate to the unchanging and eternal. By placing good thoughts in our minds, we find the path to skillful living. This is not the elimination of what disturbs us; it is putting in things that are better. It is a “displacement theory,” putting sureties in the place of uncertainties, that do not resolve the fact of uncertainties; it minimizes them! Let us look at the Wisdom of the wise.

They are to be memorized, or at least the source of reflection.

The method of execution is to take selected verses from the main sections of the book to establish my point. I am asking that we mediate on them this week.

The book of instruction (1:8-9:18)

The initial collection of Solomon's proverbs (10:1- 22:16)

The "Sayings of the Wise" (22:17-24:34)

The Collection of Solomon's proverbs by Hezekiah's scribes (25:1-29:27)

Topic: the *security* of the child of God.

1. The Foundation of Security

"He who trusts in riches will fall
But the righteous will flourish like the green grass (11:28)."

- a. Solomon tells us that people find security in one of two spheres: the accumulation of wealth (disposable assets, circumstances) and faith, the temporal or the eternal.
- b. Wisdom suggests that temporal things may be necessary and wonderful but are bound to be a withered brown leaf, ultimate ruin. God's people make the object of their faith/trust God Himself.
- c. The promise of God is found in the metaphor of a green leaf, a symbol of prosperity and fertility in that culture.

"The wicked are overthrown and are no more,
But the house of the righteous will stand (12:7)."

- a. Again, Solomon speaks of the stability of the righteous contrasted to the insecurity of the faithless in troublesome times. Jesus made the same point when he compared the wise to the foolish in a construction metaphor (Matt. 7:24-27).
- b. The unrighteous face a surety but is it in stark contrast to those who have an object of trust beyond the temporal (perhaps an illusion to Gen. 7 ["But God remembered Noah...", 8:1] or Gen 19 (Sodom).

"The name of the Lord is a strong tower
the righteous run to it and are safe (18:10)."

- a. This is the only place in the proverbs that the phrase, "the name of the Lord" appears. The noun "Name" focuses on the character or attributes of our Lord (principally here is protective power).
- b. The first line delineates the character of the Lord ("A strong tower" is a military term, a place of refuge), the second the action of God's people. We "run" into the arms of our security. Tower is a metaphor for wholehearted trust; we run to our Lord in troubled times for our protection. "I have called you by name; you are Mine (Isa. 43:1)."

2. The Promises that are ours

"...he who listens to me shall live securely.
And will be at ease from the dread of evil (1:33)."

- a. The term “listens” implies more than hearing; it involves heeding as well. The promise is magnificent.
- b. The first line states a fact, the second the consequence.
- c. Moral integrity is the fruit of skillful living. It is our bulwark against fear of adverse circumstances.

“Then he taught me and said to me,
 ‘Let your heart hold fast my words;
 Keep my commandments and live... (4:4).”

- a. The instructor teaches us “youthful” wisdom through the collectivity of experience.
- b. What did he say:
 - 1. It is the heart that is the decision-maker, not the mind that simply gathers information.
 - 2. What we are to cling to with our inner-most convictions is the wisdom expressed in “my words”.
 - 3. It is something we all must do; it is a choice we must all embrace (“let”).
 - 4. The goal is a worthy obedience to God (“Keep my commandments”).
 - 5. The result is our lives, guided by the transcendent wisdom of God, possess the virtues of discernment and prudence (“live”).

“The fear of man brings a snare,
 But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted (29:25).”

- a. A reverential respect and awe of God should take precedence over temporal fears and desires. The eternal separated from the temporal, listening to the latter, is unwise.
- b. Here is a wonderful promise. Integrity in honoring God will pay dividends (“the Lord will exalt you”). I would say in this life and surely in the next, eternal, phase.

3. The Benefits of Divine Security

“...the LORD gives wisdom;
 from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding (2:5).”

Here is something that you and I can embrace because of the trustworthiness of God who alone is impeccably truth, justice, and mercy.

“Discretion will guard you,
 Understanding will watch over you (2:11).”

- a. For all of us, focusing on the wisdom of God, not the easy way out or the quest for temporal self-perseveration, though at times painful, is the promise of God.
- b. “Guard” and “watch over” are promises that God alone can make and has done so. This should be our focus.

“He who walks in integrity walks securely,
 But he who perverts his ways will be found out (10:9).”

- a. "Walks" suggests one's daily demeanor. The substance of our walking is "integrity. The promise in doing is "security."
- b. The contrast is also a startling promise. Those who "pervert" will find themselves endlessly tossed about as the dry leaves in the fall.

"The fear of the LORD leads to life,
So that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil (19:23)."

- a. When you toss and turn at night and grasped by uncertainty, and worry during the day, you need to ask where your focus and security lie. Are you looking up or down?
- b. Here is a litmus test for evidence of skillful living ("life").
- c. We might ask ourselves if fear is not evidence that we are not trusting the only One we must hold in "reverential awe."

I find great direction for myself when I sing to God this rather wonderful poem/song. The theme of the lyrics is seeking God in times of trouble and distress, having joy in times of fear and weakness. The lyrics are based on a verse.

"I have called you by name; you are Mine (Isa. 43:1)."

You are my hiding place
You always fill my heart
With songs of deliverance
Whenever I am afraid
I will trust in You
I will trust in You
Let the weak say I am strong
In the strength of the Lord
I will trust in You
I will trust in You

(Michael Ledner, 2004)