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Proverbs: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

As we start the Book of Proverbs, we should consider its significance as a book of wisdom. Themes of wisdom pervade the biblical text from the very beginning of the scripture, where the Lord acts to create the world in wisdom, as Adam and Eve seek wisdom through eating of the forbidden fruit, as characters like Jacob display cunning in their actions, and Joseph, through wisdom, interprets the dreams of Pharaoh and administers the grain supply of Egypt with great prudence. Wisdom is associated with

knowledge, with skill, with the ability to get things done.

The Lord created using his wisdom. Psalm 104, verse 24, O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all. The earth is full of your creatures.

Wisdom is associated with the art of living well, with the practical reason that is honed over time. It is associated with experience and maturity. It can be spoken of as a gift of God, as we see in the story of Solomon in 1 Kings, chapter 3. It's also a result of searching and listening, as we will see in Proverbs, chapter 2, and in chapter 3, verse 13.

The practice of obedience is foundational for its attainment. It's also realised in community with the wise, as you spend time in the counsel of those who have already attained it. Wisdom is a prerequisite for just judgment and ruling.

The knowledge of good and evil is associated with wisdom in various parts of Scripture. Wisdom is especially needed for those who act as kings. Wisdom is also something that acknowledges the riddle character of life, the patterns of human life that have to be puzzled out and understood over time.

The book of Proverbs, in Hebrew, Greek, and English, is named after its distinctive genre of the proverb. There is abundant evidence that the book of Proverbs was considered authoritative from earlier on. Its ordering in our canon connects it with other books that are attributed to Solomon.

The Hebrew canon divides the Scriptures into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, and in that canon, the book of Proverbs is found among the Writings. The Writings, in turn, are divided into three poetic books, Psalms, Job, and Proverbs, five festival scrolls, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther, and then Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon in the superscription, as in Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

Within the historical narrative, King Solomon is synonymous with wisdom. That there should be an association with Solomon and the book of Proverbs and its wisdom is as natural as the association between King David and the Psalms. Whereas the Law in Scripture presents people with a do this, don't do that pattern for behaviour, the wisdom literature works in terms of the categories of wisdom and folly, focusing not so much upon commandments, but upon the rationale for behaviour, and the consequences of good and bad courses of action.

In the process, it helps us to understand more of the logic behind the Law, of the goodness of the Law, that the Law is not just arbitrarily imposed upon us, but that it is reasonable and good, and that those that follow it will typically prosper. While the primary form of the Law is a word imposed upon people from without that they submit to and acknowledge, wisdom is arrived at through reflection upon the world. The Law itself

already makes movements towards helping people to understand its inner rationale.

In books like Deuteronomy, we see the condensed form of the Law in the Ten Commandments, and then that expounded in the chapters that follow, as the hearer of the Law meditates upon the connection between these things, and the connection between the Law and the narrative, a deeper understanding will emerge. Deuteronomy 4, verses 5-8, gives some sense of the wisdom that will arise as people live in terms of, and seek to understand, the logic of the Law. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

Keep them, and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people, for what great nation is there that has a God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules, so righteous as all this Law that I set before you today? Just as the Law, in its wisdom, was supposed to draw other nations to look to and learn from Israel, so the wisdom literature was also something that should have drawn other nations to learn from Israel. The Queen of Sheba and various other people in the region came to learn from Solomon in his day. The wisdom of Solomon came from an insight into the world, from a knowledge of a natural law, the logic that God had built into his creation.

It is not directly dictated, as the Law is, rather it arises from the insight that the Lord gave to Solomon into his world and the way that it works. The revelation of the wisdom literature is not so much an object in itself, a body of special revelation delivered by God like the Ten Commandments, rather it is the result of the Holy Spirit opening people's eyes to see the revelation in the world. Consequently, there is a very strong empirical character to the Book of Proverbs.

This is the result of reflection upon God's world and upon society. On account of this empirical character, and the fact that its character as special revelation arises more from the manner of its disclosure than from the truths disclosed, we can see a great many parallels between the Book of Proverbs and other works of wisdom literature in the ancient Near East. This shouldn't surprise us.

They are all looking at the same world. Wisdom is a sort of order imminent in creation. It is a matter not primarily of speculative reason, but of practical reason.

It is discovered as the art of living well. In scripture, such wisdom can be seen in rule and the exercise of power. It can also be seen in the cunning of those who are in positions of weakness, but manage to outwit those who are more powerful.

Some have suggested that the books of Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes can be

related to different periods of the wise person's life. The Solomon of Song of Songs is the youthful Solomon. The Solomon of Proverbs is the father of the young man.

And the Solomon of Ecclesiastes is the older Solomon, looking back over his life. Although this is a speculative theory and many would dispute it, it does bring to light the importance of time and wisdom. Wisdom is learned through experience, through passing through various seasons of life.

As the wise person grows through these various seasons in life, they colour and help him to grow in his insight. While the Book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon at the beginning, other people are mentioned as authors or compilers of it. In chapter 22 verse 17 and 24 verse 23, the wise are mentioned as authors of some of the material.

In chapter 30 verse 1, Eger is mentioned. And King Lemuel is mentioned in chapter 31 verse 1, as passing on the teaching that his mother gave him. Advisors of King Hezekiah are also mentioned as exercising a scribal or editorial role in chapter 25 verse 1. Proverbs generally emerge in an oral context, and then they are authored and collected.

Solomon did not write the whole book, but he seems to be foundational to the collection. The historical account of 1 Kings chapter 4 verses 29 to 34 records the fact that Solomon was the author of many proverbs. And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt.

For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezraite, and Heman, Kalkal, and Dada, the sons of Mahal. And his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five.

He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon, to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

Several proverbs speak to situations that seem to be rather distant from the life of the court. Even in chapter 1, there is the warning to the young man against falling in with gangs, expressing a temptation that a young prince would probably not feel as keenly in the same form. Solomon is not necessarily the author of chapters 1 to 9, and various other parts of the book.

The book seems to have been open and added to for quite some time. There are various verses that are nearly repeated. Chapter 14 verse 12 is very similar to chapter 16 verse 25.

Verses 10 and 11 of chapter 6 to chapter 24 verses 33 to 34. Chapter 10 verse 1 to chapter 15 verse 20. It is important to recognize various editorial hands in compiling and

gathering the material together, and forming it into a unified work.

It is important, however, to pay attention to the final product and the context of this work. It is a canonical text with a unified character of its own. Its material is not ordered in a haphazard manner, but there is a logic and an overarching order.

The superscriptions of the text give us some indication of the structure of the book. Chapter 1 verses 1 to 7 is the preamble. That's followed in chapter 1 verse 8 to 9 verse 18 with an extended discourse on wisdom.

Chapter 10 verse 1 to chapter 22 verse 16 is a collection of Solomonic proverbs. Chapter 22 verse 17 to 24 verse 34 are the sayings of the wise. Chapter 25 verse 1 to 29 verse 27 are more Solomonic proverbs.

Chapter 30 verses 1 to 33 are the sayings of Eger. Chapter 31 verses 1 to 9 are sayings of King Lemuel. And then the final part of the book in verses 10 to 31 of chapter 31.

It's a great poem to the virtuous woman. Although the main body of the book contains classic proverbs, there are genre distinctions. Chapters 1 to 9 contain discourses and speeches, whereas chapter 10 to 31 contain the more typical form that we think of as proverbs.

And the proverbs themselves seem to speak to and come from various contexts. Some speak to a court context, for instance chapter 23 verses 1 to 3. Others are more agricultural, as in chapter 10 verse 5. As in the book of Jeremiah, which was also compiled of various material over time, the book of Proverbs has an order difference between the Masoretic Hebrew and the Septuagint text. The later part of the book is ordered as follows.

The sayings of Eger come first, followed by the further sayings of the wise, then the numerical parallelisms of chapter 30 verses 15 to 33, then the sayings of King Lemuel, more Solomonic proverbs compiled by Hezekiah's men, and then finally the poem to the virtuous woman. Most of the proverbs that we have in this book are brief statements of truth. They can be observations, exhortations, or other sorts of declarations.

However, it is important that they be used properly, in the right time and circumstance. There are conditions for the truth of a proverb that must be understood. Many hands make light work, and too many cooks spoil the broth seem to have opposing meanings, but in the right context they are both true.

In the mouths of the wise they are powerful, but in the mouths of fools they are destructive. Improperly used, they can be useless or worse, something that the book of Proverbs itself highlights. Chapter 15 verse 23 speaks of the importance of the apt answer, the word that's spoken in season.

Chapter 26 verse 7 declares, Like a lame man's legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools. And verse 9 of that chapter, Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard, is a proverb in the mouth of fools. Proverbs are typically poetic and usually terser in Hebrew than they are in translation.

As we move forward in the book we'll see different types. There are antithetical ones, there are better than proverbs, there are proverbs that compare things to others, saying that they are like them. There are also number parallelisms, such as we see in chapter 30 verses 18 to 19.

The prologue of the book, in chapters 1 to 9, largely contains speeches from the father to the son, and from lady wisdom to young men. Within these chapters, the fundamental lessons are taught about the correct posture towards wisdom. Young men are taught about the danger of evil associations, the importance of giving their heart to wisdom, the blessings and the goodness and the integrity of wisdom, the importance of being mindful of your path and guarding your heart, the danger of gangs and promiscuous women, the importance of the fear of the Lord over everything else, and the long-term benefits of the way of wisdom.

The chapter begins by introducing us to the source of the book, Solomon, who is the author and perhaps also compiler of some of the foundational material. He's the son of David and the king of Israel, both things that qualify him as someone to learn wisdom from. It's not addressed to a particular named person, which perhaps, as Bruce Waltke suggests, gives it a more democratic character.

Following the introduction of the author, there is a preamble containing the purpose of the proverbs, to know wisdom and to understand its mode of expression, words of insight. The submissive learner receives practical wisdom, mastery, the art and skill of living well, and the teacher gives prudence to the inexperienced, the immature and the morally unformed. This is also written for the sake of the wise, those who have already gained a great deal of understanding, can return to and reflect upon these proverbs and these words of wisdom with great profit.

Fundamental to everything is the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This is perhaps the great refrain of the wisdom literature, and much of the material of scripture returns to this theme.

Job is described as one who fears the Lord, and in chapter 28, verses 23 to 28 of his book, we read, God understands the way to it, and he knows its place, for he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight, and appointed the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then he saw it and declared it, he established it and searched it out, and he said to man, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. Psalms 111 and 112 are a great pair of wisdom

psalms.

The last verse of Psalm 111 reads, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

The first verse of Psalm 112 reads, Praise the Lord, blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments. We find similar statements at many points in the book of Proverbs. Chapter 1, verse 7. Chapter 9, verse 10.

Chapter 15, verse 33. Chapter 16, verse 6. Chapter 19, verse 23. We also find related statements in Ecclesiastes, chapter 12, verse 13, and Isaiah, chapter 11, verses 1 to 5. There are various facets of the fear of the Lord that help to explain why it might be the beginning of wisdom.

It's associated with humility, a recognition of your place and your limitations and a need to be subject to the teaching of the Lord. It's associated with obedience, a commitment to follow the Lord's commands and to learn through that practice. It's associated with love, a desire to seek after wisdom and to pursue it until you've found it.

It's associated with reverence, a posture of wonder and awe towards the Lord, true wonder that is not enthralled or enslaved by anything lower than God himself. Wisdom is how God formed the world, and to live by wisdom is to live with the grain of God's universe. And this posture of thought is a personal and a moral one, out of the heart spring the issues of life.

For the Book of Proverbs, wisdom and folly are not primarily matters of the mind, but matters of the heart. The man with great intelligence but with a disordered heart will often only end up pursuing the way of folly with greater intensity. His intelligence can be used to rationalise more fully his folly to himself.

The book is framed by the address to the Son by the Father. Throughout, the figure of the young man is the most prominent and primary addressee. The book is especially concerned with the temptations and dangers, the duties and possibilities that present themselves to the young man.

Considering the prominence of the figure of the young man will also help us to appreciate the overarching theme of the choice of a spouse or female companion that runs throughout the book and gives it much of its order. The period of young adulthood is a time of sowing, for which the reaping will come later. Wisdom comes with time and experience, as people have passed through periods of sowing and reaping in their lives and realised the consequences of good and bad choices in those periods of sowing.

The Father's voice, importantly, is not alone. The young man is told to hearken to his mother's teaching, and in chapter 31 we encounter teaching given to King Lemuel by his mother as the conclusion and the summation of the book's message. The authority of

parents is of great importance in the communication of wisdom.

This is the fifth commandment, to honour Father and Mother second only to the fear of the Lord. We might recognise something of the logic of the Ten Commandments here. As people fear the Lord and keep the first four commandments and honour their father and mother, keeping the fifth, wise obedience to the rest of the commandments will follow more naturally.

In Exodus and Deuteronomy, the fifth commandment comes with promise, and this one does too. Hearing and keeping the words of father and mother result in a sort of adornment of the faithful son. When we think about character, we might think in terms of virtues and graces.

Virtues are particularly associated with characteristics of action, but graces, things that people can see in us, traits of character. These are attractive facets of our character. If the person obeys his father and mother, he will discover over time that his obedience to their teaching is a glory to him.

Through his honouring of his father and mother, he himself has become honourable. Heeding father and mother is prudent for various reasons. They are generally the people who most have our good in mind, they are best acquainted with us, and they have demonstrated their character and values to us in their own actions, making both trust in them and emulation of them well founded.

All of this makes the posture of trust in them, as our initial guides, quite reasonable. Contrasting with the path of the son who heeds his parents is the path of the son who heeds the call of sinners. It might be notable that the book of Psalms also begins with a similar juxtaposition of two paths and warns against bad company.

Psalm 1 verses 1-2 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. Verses 11-14 describe the temptation presented by the gang to the young man. Gangs appeal to young men's virility, their desire to exercise their strength, to enjoy companionship and respect of male peers, to belong to a tight-knit band of brothers, and to obtain wealth and status.

Here the young man is presented with the possibility of getting rich quickly through violence, murder and robbery. As in the case of the adulterous woman, who will later appeal to the impulses of his lust, the appeal of the gang is, as Mark Horne observes, the appeal to the desire to obtain something good without diligence, self-mastery, sustained effort, self-restraint, faithfulness or patience. It is good for the young man to desire power, camaraderie, honour and wealth.

His virility is not a bad thing in itself, but it requires self-mastery. Indeed, much of the

Book of Proverbs teaches such men how to obtain these things. The father warns his son against the young man of the gang.

Such men can easily be driven by a hunger for violence itself, for the expression of unconstrained power. Evil becomes attractive to such men, not merely as a means to some other end, as a shortcut to wealth and power, but in itself as an experience of lawless power. High on their own testosterone, they desire the thrill of using their strength in service of their unchecked desires and to subdue others beneath them.

However, in contrast to the man who has mastered his own strength and expresses it in a self-controlled manner, such men are running to their own ruin. Their chosen course is both evil and foolish. It will bring their destruction upon their head.

In Proverbs 4, verses 14-19, we read of this in more detail. Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it.

Do not go on it. Turn away from it and pass on, for they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong. They are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble, for they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness. They do not know over what they stumble.

The voice, the invitation and the warning of personified lady wisdom is an important repeated motif in the book, and here we encounter her for the first time. She is characterized as elsewhere in the prologue of the book as a female figure at the gates and major thoroughfares calling to young men. These are sites of entrance, of association and commerce.

They are the places where the simple would be most likely to be led astray, to join the wrong company or to engage in unjust action. The concluding section of the chapter contains both her message to the simple youths but also her reflection upon her message and its reception. Bruce Waltke suggests that verses 22-33 follow a bookended pattern.

Verses 22-23 contain wisdom's exasperation with the unresponsive gullible and fools and verses 32-33 which correspond contain the death of the gullible and all fools in contrast to the security of the wise. The next section, in verses 24-25, contains the gullible being condemned for refusing her rebuke and the same thing happens in verses 30-31. In verses 27-28, as in verses 29-30, wisdom rejects and mocks these people at the time of judgment.

Lady Wisdom observes the simple youth's love of being simple, the law of irresponsibility, of lack of accountability, of resistance to counsel and authority, an

absence of self-control, the enjoyment of levity and a disregard for rebuke. The simple take refuge in mockery and levity as a way of deflecting the gravity of truth and wisdom. What Lady Wisdom offers to such people is a rebuke and if they will accept this rebuke, the opportunity to turn before it is too late, before they have become so settled in the way of folly or doomed themselves to the bitter fruits of its harvest.

If they respond appropriately, she will pour out her spirit to them like a fountain of truthful words that will bestow life to them. However, her speech ends with a denunciation. They have rejected her words and so she will mock them when calamity strikes.

At that point it will be too late and wisdom won't be anywhere to be found. Their key failure was their hatred of knowledge and their rejection of the fear of the Lord. They were proud, wanted to be flattered and rejected rebuke and correction.

The end of her speech reveals the inherent danger of the path of the wicked, whereas those who follow the path of wisdom will enjoy ease and will experience safety. A question to consider, why might the fools in the time of their distress not be able to find wisdom anymore? In Proverbs chapter 2, the father takes up his address to his son again. Bruce Waltke observes that this chapter could be regarded as an alphabetic poem.

Many of the subjects introduced in this chapter will be unpacked in the chapters that follow and in this chapter we have a condensed expression of many themes that we will see later on. Even though it is not an acrostic, it is a single sentence with 22 verses corresponding in their number to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It divides into two equal parts, the first half from verses 1 to 11 and the second from verses 12 to 22.

The two halves can each be broken down further into two stanzas of four verses and one of three verses. The first half concerns the formative effect of wisdom upon the young man and the second half the way that this formation will lead to the son's deliverance from a series of particular dangers, from wicked men and from the adulterous woman. When reading scripture more generally, the structure is illuminating of the meaning, as when we do a jigsaw puzzle it is far easier to assemble the puzzle when we are attending both to the shapes of the pieces and to the images upon them.

The poetic forms of the book of Proverbs are means by which its wisdom is discovered and we will see this quite clearly within this chapter. There is a movement here from the reception of the words from without to the treasuring of the words within, which we see in the first few verses. Words must be memorised and meditated upon.

The first couple of verses enjoin a mental posture of attentiveness to the sources of wisdom without us and a disposition, a turning of the heart towards understanding. Between verses 1 and 2 and verses 3 and 4 we have a movement from a receptive

posture to a posture of pursuing wisdom in a far more active sense. The son is supposed to take a posture similar to that by which Lady Wisdom was described in chapter 1 in his pursuit of insight.

It is one thing to be receptive to wisdom when it comes across our path, another to be proactive and relentless in our pursuit of it. Far too many people receive wisdom somewhat reluctantly, rather than running after it. There is an implicit comparison here to the young man pursuing a woman and then to the quest for hidden treasure, an endeavour requiring great commitment and diligence, yet promising considerable rewards.

The result of such a pursuit for the hidden treasure of wisdom is revealed in the second stanza, nothing less than the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God. The fear of the Lord has earlier been described as the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is both what sets people on the right course for the pursuit of wisdom, but also that which the quest deepens.

The knowledge of God is personal and intimate acquaintance with one's Creator. Wisdom is not primarily wrested from the world, but granted by God. The gift of the Lord's wisdom principally comes from His mouth, from the words of wisdom given in the law, and from the words of the sages to whom He has granted insight, words that are delivered through the words of the father and the mother.

The person who meditates upon the word of the Lord and upon the words of those to whom the Lord has granted wisdom will have a great advantage over any relying simply upon their own understanding. The Lord is the source of wisdom for the righteous. As the righteous person constantly turns to the Lord for guidance, he experiences the Lord's protection in his way.

This protection is, I believe, both the Lord's gracious, protective oversight of the path of His people and the inherently safer nature of the path of righteousness. There are instructive parallels between verses 9-11, the third stanza, and the preceding stanza in verses 5-8, as Waltke recognizes. Verses 5 and 9 are paralleled, both summing up the result of a form of education in a statement beginning, Then you will understand.

Verses 6 and 10 are paralleled, both substantiating the summary statement that precedes them in a statement beginning with the word for. Finally, verses 8 and 11 are paralleled, both speaking of the way that the person who has been formed in such a manner will be watched over and guarded. In the parallels we witness an important progression from the wisdom of the external instruction of the Lord to the wisdom of a person who is deeply internalized and now delights in such instruction.

They meditate and reflect upon it. This movement is a very important one if we are to understand the wisdom literature more generally. In wisdom there is an internalizing of

the word in delight, in memorization, in meditation, in desire, and in understanding.

This is something seen in the Psalms and also in places like the book of Proverbs. The wise words of the Lord have become part of the righteous, just as the tablets of the covenant are treasured in the ark of the covenant at the heart of the temple, so the word of the Lord is treasured in the heart of the wise. Many of us have great wisdom around us.

We have wise counselors, we have access to the insights of gifted scholars and sages in our libraries, and most importantly we have the guidance of divine wisdom in scripture to which we devote ourselves. However, those who devote themselves to such external sources of wisdom will gradually find that those voices become part of their internal conversation, that their insight has taken up residence within, that wisdom has come into their heart, as verse 10 suggests. As wisdom is internalized, knowledge will become increasingly desirable, pleasant to the wise son's soul.

The guarding that such a person experiences will increasingly be experienced from within. Such a person will have a discretion and understanding that protects him. Devotion to the instruction of the Lord and internalized wisdom, the formation described in the first half of the poem of this chapter, will deliver the son from the evil way, from the wickedness of men such as those described in the preceding chapter.

The men described in these verses are marked out by their rejection of the straight and clear paths of uprightness, for crooked paths in darkness, on which people will fall or be snared. Such men, in contrast to the wise son who finds knowledge pleasant, rejoice in doing evil and delight in its perverseness. They value evil for its evilness.

Such men are not to be trusted, their speech is twisted and their ways are devious. In addition to being delivered from wicked men, wisdom will also deliver from the forbidden woman and the adulteress. The young man is tempted not just by the gang and by the appeal of their vision of an evil brotherhood, but also by the allure of the promiscuous woman, the promise of whose sexual favors tempt him to devote his energies to her pursuit.

This promiscuous woman will be an important figure in the Book of Proverbs more generally, especially in chapters 5-7. She is paradigmatic in many ways, she represents the appeal of folly herself. The men of the gang tempt with their perverted speech, the adulteress woman tempts with her smooth words.

Speech and the weighing of words is a recurring theme throughout the Book of Proverbs. The wise person is a master of his own words, and a prudent judge of those of others. The temptation of the adulteress woman is felt chiefly through the smoothness of her words, through their power to flatter those who have not established a firm grasp of the proper sources of a healthy self-regard.

Once again, as Waltke notes, there are parallels between two stanzas here, verses 12-15 and verses 16-19. Verses 12 and 16 are paralleled in their statements concerning deliverance from the dangerous speech of some threatening group or figure, the speech of perverse men and the words of the strange woman. Verses 13 and 17 both speak of forsaking something, the perverse men forsake the paths of uprightness and the forbidden woman forsakes the companion of her youth.

Verses 14-15 and verses 18-19 describe the respective paths of the perverse men and the forbidden woman, indicating the doom of those who follow them. The poem ends with a description of the ways and paths of the good and the righteous, in contrast to those offered by evil men and adulterous women. The theme of contrasting ways, a wise and righteous path leading to life and a foolish and wicked path leading to death, is one that is encountered throughout the scriptures.

We ought to consider the way that the wisdom literature develops this theme of the contrasting paths, the path of righteousness and the path of wickedness, the path of obedience and the path of disobedience, are now elaborated to include the juxtaposition of wisdom and folly, as the one following the path of righteousness begins to discern more fully its rationale, even beyond the duty of obedience. The final two verses declare the contrasting fates of the upright and the wicked, much as in places like Psalm 1, but perhaps the clearest comparison is between these verses and Psalm 37. In verses 5-11 of that psalm we read, A question to consider, where else in scripture do we see the choice between two paths placed before people? The third and fourth speeches of the book of Proverbs are found in chapter 3, the third is in verses 1-12 and the fourth in verses 13-35.

Once again this is an address of a father to his son. The third speech presents the son with a series of charges, attended with promises or blessings, keeping the father's commandments, not letting go of steadfast love and faithfulness, trusting the Lord, fearing the Lord and honouring the Lord, concluding with the admonition not to despise the discipline of the Lord. The speech begins by enjoining the son to keep the commandments of his human father, but ends with comparing the Lord to a father who lovingly disciplines his son.

We might imagine Solomon training his own son here, with the hearer as an eavesdropper. However the framing of the father teaching the son need not be focused so narrowly upon such a concrete referent, it may be more of a literary device designed to democratise the book in terms of the father-son relationship more generally. The promise with which this speech begins recalls the promise of the fifth commandment in Exodus 20, verse 12 Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you.

In the speech that follows, in verse 16 of this chapter, length of days is presented as the

reward of wisdom. The blessing promised to the son who honours his father's instruction presumably comes because the wisdom of the father's instruction and counsel will guard the son's ways as he is beginning in his way and has not yet internalised wisdom himself, and as he matures will also prove their wisdom to him in his own experience. Perhaps the greatest of the challenges with regard to wisdom is where to find it.

If you are not yet wise, how are you to know where to look for it? The instruction of parents is a very natural and in most situations the most promising place to begin. Wisdom first comes to us in the form of authoritative commandments that must be kept. Authority provides us with a reason for action before we have reasons of our own.

However, good authority seeks to inform obedience so that it is offered increasingly willingly rather than by coercion or mere thoughtless compliance. Parental authority may begin with the command, but it seeks to acquaint the child with the goodness of what is commanded, so that the principle with which the child is first acquainted as an external constraint or demand becomes a willing and witting principle of behaviour, which the child comes proactively to observe and understand. The statement of the father to the son here gestures towards just such a type of formation.

The son must treasure and hold on to steadfast love and faithfulness, virtues that seem to correspond with the fear of the Lord in chapter 16 verse 6. While superstitious persons might bind protective charms round their necks, the son here is told that he will discover his father's teaching in the fear of the Lord will readily answer to such an end. The father's teaching will also be like an adornment that a man might wear round his neck that would attract people's attention and praise. He must also write them upon the tablet of his heart.

Memorisation of the instruction of the father is a critical step in the process of internalising the wisdom of his lessons. The word hidden in the tablet of the heart should also recall for us the tablet of the law in the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle, which among other things symbolised the human heart. Proverbs chapter 6 verses 20-22 make a similar statement.

My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching. Bind them on your heart always, tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you.

When you lie down, they will watch over you. And when you awake, they will talk with you. The hearer should likely remember the words of Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4-9 here, and recognise the implicit association between the teaching of the father and the teaching of the law, and between the father's teaching of his son and the Lord's teaching of Israel as his firstborn son.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all

your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6, the word of the law, the word of the Lord's teaching of his son Israel, is communicated by fathers to their sons, just as the Lord promises prosperity to Israel if they diligently keep his commandments, so the father here gives his son a similar assurance, a blessing, if he observes his instruction. Children are initially cast upon their parents. They depend upon their parents and don't have much of a choice but to trust them.

Wisdom requires this initial stage of trust. We will never obtain wisdom without trusting others to direct us into it. The challenge is to trust the right people, and to move to a point where we are increasingly exercising our trust responsibly, circumspectly, and with discretion, rather than merely trusting people because we cannot do otherwise.

Over time, for instance, we will find our trust of wise people is rewarded with blessing, which makes ongoing trust in them even more reasonable and understandable. The good father recognises his own limitations as a guide in the path of wisdom, and while he wants to direct his son as far as he can, the primary form of direction that he can give is to wiser teachers than he. Above all else, his task is to direct his son towards the Lord.

In the rest of this third speech, the father teaches his son to relate to the Lord with trust, fear, and honour, and to submit to his discipline. This is the most important lesson that he can teach, for the fear of the Lord is the wellspring and the greatest substance of wisdom. To trust in the Lord is, among other things, to observe his commandments in the confidence of his ordering of the world and in his providential rule over it.

Those who depend on their own impressions will often be tempted to divert from the Lord's instructions, as they believe that success and prosperity will come more readily by following their own counsels. They see the wicked prospering, and believe that they would be better off if they followed them in their ways, rather than walking in the way of uprightness. We see the psalmist struggling with this in places like Psalm 73, where Asaph describes his initial envy of the wicked, as they apparently prospered, wondering whether his righteousness was all in vain.

It was only through trust in the Lord, and in turning to him, that he was brought back from that brink. Psalm 37 describes something similar in verses 1-7. Wisdom is about the long-term course of our lives, about what we sow, and what we will reap.

It is about the consistency to make good commitments and to follow through with them, doggedly persevering even when things look unpromising. Here we see that wisdom is a matter of living by faith, not by sight. The time should come when that faith is confirmed by sight.

But much of the time we simply have to act in a stubborn and daring confidence that the world is ruled by the Lord, and that, if we commit our ways to him and act in dependence upon him, we will be blessed by him. Even when there may be many contrary and disheartening appearances along the way, the Lord will guard us from a myriad unseen dangers, protecting our paths, not allowing us to be tempted beyond what we are able, and leading us in a path whose destination is blessedness. Fear of the Lord here involves turning away from evil.

It is also the alternative to being wise in one's own eyes. It involves a posture of humility, a recognition that we have not attained to wisdom, and that we need to trust the Lord, who is its true source. Wisdom can be pursued, but we will never fully possess it.

Trust in and fear of the Lord should be accompanied by an honouring of the Lord. Here the Father gives the specific case of the presentation of the first fruits to the Lord. The first fruits are the beginning of the produce, or the harvest, the things one might be most tempted to keep back, leaving the Lord with whatever is left over at the end instead.

While this relates to agricultural produce, we should probably discern a metaphor for our lives here. The son might think that he wants to keep the first fruits of the harvest of his life to himself. One could imagine him thinking, these are the best years of my life, my late teens and early twenties.

Surely I should be allowed to enjoy them on my own terms, to have a good time, to sow my wild oats, and then I will serve the Lord in my thirties. However, when the thirties come, the path of folly will be well set, and its bitter harvest already starting to appear. Had he honoured the Lord by presenting him with the first fruits of his years, he would be prospering and experiencing rich blessing in many areas of his life.

We should not delay our service of the Lord. We should give him the first fruits of our life, our week, our day, our wealth, and we will be richer in the rest of it on that account. The Lord, as a loving Father, disciplines his sons.

Those who trust in, fear, and honour the Lord, will also find that they are disciplined by him, which, as the author of Hebrews argues, quoting verses 11-12 of this chapter, while never pleasant at the time, later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. The Father wants to bring out virtue in his son, to form his son into his good character. The Lord wants us to grow as those created in his image, which relates to the theme of sonship in Scripture.

This however requires painful correction, as the Lord deals with our folly, often through bringing us into suffering on its account. If we want to be treated as sons, and to grow into a closer relationship with our Heavenly Father, we are asking for the Lord to take our sin and our folly seriously, and to deal with us in ways sufficient to correct them. If there is one thing that the proud fool dislikes, it is correction and rebuke.

However, the wise and good son desires such correction, he wishes to grow by it. The wise cultivate great sensitivity to correction, while fools harden themselves against it. As Proverbs 17-10 puts it, a rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.

The fourth speech of the verse is 13-35, stringing together four distinct sections, verses 13-18, 19-20, 21-26 and 27-35. As Bruce Waltke notes, it begins with an encomium to wisdom, extolling its surpassing value. Verses 13-18 concern the blessedness of the man who finds wisdom, beginning with the beatitude, blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding.

Wealth offers many advantages and benefits, but wisdom, the father assures his son, greatly exceeds wealth and its value, and should be valued and pursued over everything else. If the son obtains wisdom, many of the blessings that the fools pursue without it will be granted to him by her. Long life, riches and honour.

The long life being in wisdom's right hand suggests its greater value than riches and honour, which are in her left. The hearer of this passage may recall Solomon's own valuation of wisdom over everything else, when the Lord appeared to him in his dream at Gibeon, in 1 Kings 3-6-13, and offered him what he wanted. Solomon said, You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you, and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day.

And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in, and your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.

For who is able to govern this your great people? It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life, or riches, or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you, and none like you shall arise after you.

I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you all your days. Besides the gifts that she offers to those who seek her, wisdom's ways are pleasant and peaceful. Solomon's wisdom was associated with the peace and flourishing of Israel as a nation.

The tree of life brings us back to the garden of Eden. The tree of life was in the center of the garden, and offered eternal life and healing to those who ate of it. The hearer should think back to the story of Genesis, and to mankind's attempt to grasp at the treasures of autonomous wisdom from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, before they were ready to receive it.

As a result, they were expelled from the garden, particularly in order that they might not have access to that tree. They were also frustrated in their labors from that point onwards. Wisdom, however, offers something of a path back into the garden.

In submitting to the Lord and seeking wisdom, rather than seeking to steal her fruit, one will get to enjoy her fruit, and enjoy the blessings of life that come from it. Adam and Eve sought the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in order to grasp at a divine-like status and power, which God had manifested in His act of creation. In verses 19-20, after the promise of wisdom serving as a tree of life to those who seek her, the father tells his son that the Lord Himself acted by wisdom in His creation and His founding of the earth and the heavens.

The world order is the product of the Lord's wisdom, and that wisdom pervades it as the imminent principle of its operations. The Lord doesn't merely create as an act of power, but also as an expression of His immeasurable wisdom. Verse 20 shows that the Lord also sustains the world by His wise providence.

We are already here venturing in the direction of the personification of wisdom as a quasi-divine principle, something that will be developed in much more detail in chapter 8. From extolling wisdom, the father moves to exhorting his son relative to it. He must make sure to obtain it, and to keep hold of it at all costs. If he does so, he will experience immense benefits on its account, life, adornment, security, and deliverance from fear and danger.

The foolish walk on dark and dangerous paths, but the wise son walks in secure, straight, and well-lit ways. He won't need to fear the pits, traps, and snares that afflict the wicked and the fools. The security of the path comes both from the path's inherently safer character, and from the fact that the Lord watches over, protects, and guards those who walk upon it.

The chapter concludes with a series of instructions concerning a proper relationship to neighbours. Verses 27-30 encourage the son readily to show good to all to whom he has any obligation, to the extent of his power to do so. He must not be grudging or reluctant

in his generosity.

We might here recall passages such as Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 7-10. If among you one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns, within your land, that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. 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 cry 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. Likewise the son must be wary of delaying or deferring his obligations of generosity to his neighbor. He must be speedy, and never withholding in his assistance.

From reluctance in generosity, verses 29-30, warn the son against malicious and violent actions against his neighbor. He must not conspire against his neighbor, nor should he be litigious, and a starter of quarrels, bringing accusations against the innocent, presumably intending to advantage himself in such a manner. The tenth commandment condemns the sin of covetousness, a sin that lies at the root of so many others.

In the wisdom literature, envy and desire are given much closer attention. While the law focuses upon more external actions, the wisdom literature is concerned to describe the growth of sin from its first incipients to its final bitter harvest. Here the son might be tempted to envy the wicked men of violence and their seeming ease.

The psalmist expresses such envy in Psalm 73, verses 3-13. 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.

Therefore pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness.

Their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice. Loftily they threaten oppression.

They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongues strut through the earth. Therefore his people turn back to them and find no fault in them. And they say, How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease.

They increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in

innocence. The father here is very concerned that his son not fall into this trap.

In verses 32-35, the father supports his warning against envy of the wicked. The final end of fools and the wicked is disgrace as the Lord is opposed to all of their ways and his curse rests upon them. Their downfall is sure to come.

But those who trust in and fear and honour the Lord will themselves inherit honour. A question to consider. What are some ways in which we can make ourselves more receptive to the correction and discipline of the Lord? Honouring father and mother, a principle that is integral to the practice and communication of wisdom, makes it possible for the lessons learned by previous generations to be passed on to later ones, without these lessons always having to be relearned from scratch the hard way.

In Proverbs chapter 4, the father shares the teaching that he himself received from his son's grandfather, which he passes on to them in turn. The father gives his sons not merely his teaching, and here the teaching being given is largely the grandfather's teaching that he is reporting, but his own example as a learner. The father's example as a faithful learner and the confirming witness of the grandfather strengthens his teaching.

He was once in his son's shoes and the lessons that he received from his father stood him in good stead. He is also passing on a family legacy of wisdom and his sons are the next link in the chain. When the time comes, they will be expected to teach their own sons as fathers in their turn.

Within these verses we can see that part of the destiny of the son setting out on the path towards wisdom is that he become a father himself one day and pass on the lessons that he learned to a new generation. The father son relationship is such that the father is raising another to fill his position in the chain of the generations. A son is a potential father and a good father is a son who has attained to an appropriate maturity.

The sons here may be not a group of brothers, but a group of students, a possibility Michael Fox mentions. Bruce Waltke suggests the possibility that the father might be speaking not to a group of his immediate children, but to the multi-generational lineage arising from him. The grandfather's training of the father began when he was still very young and impressionable, still very much within the orbit of his mother and dependent on her tenderness.

The image here is of a loving household with two parents actively committed to their child's care and instruction. The importance of the involvement of fathers and mothers in the raising of the son is seen at many points in the book of Proverbs. Father and mother both bring something distinct to the task of child-rearing and there are different areas where the teaching of one or the other becomes more important.

Gender dynamics pervade the book of Proverbs in ways to which we ought to be

attentive. The father-son relationship is treated as paradigmatic for the passing on of wisdom, but the quest for the right woman is seen as paradigmatic for attaining it. Wisdom is personified as a woman and the book ends with a great poem concerning the wise wife.

The most important thing in the instruction of the grandfather reported by the father was that the son must get wisdom, here implicitly personified as the woman he should want as his bride. As Genesis chapter 2 verse 24 teaches, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife in marriage. In many respects the paradigmatic process of a son's development is from the tender care of his mother to the instruction in the law of his father to the arms of his bride.

Both the mother and the father have to propel their son towards another. The mother needs to move the son more into the orbit of his father lest he remain a psychologically underdeveloped mother's boy. The father needs to move the son out into the world so that he can move out of his father's shadow and start his own household and family.

A crucial part of the instruction that will make this move possible is teaching in the quest for a bride. And here the real bride that must be sought is lady wisdom. The father's teaching will last for a season, but the time will come when the son must move out from under it and it is imperative that he does so as one devoted to lady wisdom as his bride.

The rewards of having lady wisdom as one's bride are considerable. One possesses wisdom not as knowledge in one's brain so much as in a manner akin to the way that one might have a wife. A husband has a wife as he commits himself to her, doesn't forsake her, as he loves her, prizes her and honours her.

The same is true of wisdom. The son is exhorted to devote himself to wisdom as he might devote himself to his wife. To possess wisdom as his own requires an enduring and deepening commitment and relationship with her, a posture of heart towards something distinct from himself to which he must always be rightly comporting.

As he commits himself to wisdom as his bride, wisdom will keep him, guard him, exalt him, honour him, adorn him and crown him with the beautiful crown that a bridegroom might wear. For Proverbs, the quest for wisdom is much more like a lifelong love affair than it is like the accumulation of information as our own culture can often think of it. The controlling metaphor starts to shift from verse 11 onwards with the theme of marriage to wisdom being replaced by that of walking in the ways of wisdom.

The exhortation to the son to heed his father's words is once again attended with the familiar promise of the fifth commandment. The days of those who heed the words of their parents will be long in the land. The palette of the metaphor of the paths of wisdom includes terms such as way, paths, walk, step, run, stumble, turning away, going on it, passing on, all terms or expressions that appear at several points in verses 10-19.

The juxtaposition of the way of righteousness and the way of wickedness here is familiar to us from other parts of Psalm 1 and its warning against walking in the way of the wicked. The metaphor of walking highlights the way that wisdom is, for Proverbs, primarily about the art of living well rather than about mere head knowledge. Wisdom is displayed in the realm of behaviour and the teaching of wisdom is mentoring and discipleship in the skills of life.

The language of verse 13 makes clear that wisdom is something that must be diligently persisted in, never abandoned and vigilantly guarded. Wisdom is nothing less than the son's life. If he loses wisdom, he loses everything.

The path of the wicked, in contrast to the way of wisdom, is treacherous and must be avoided at all costs. In verses 14 and 15 the father adds warning to warning, lest the son fail to recognise just how imperative it is that he resist the law of the way of the wicked. The verses that follow describe the wicked as those whose regular bodily rest is hampered by their commitment to evil.

Wickedness consumes them. They are obsessed with it. It becomes more essential to them than sleep and their very food and drink.

There couldn't be a starker contrast than there is between the path of such evil men and the path of the righteous. The father adopts the very strongest of oppositions to describe the difference. It's the difference between light and darkness.

The path of the righteous isn't merely like light, but it is like the rising light of the dawn. It becomes clearer and more glorious as it ascends. Righteousness matures over time.

The wisdom of those who have persisted in the way of wisdom for many years greatly exceeds those who are just setting out on it. By contrast, the wicked walk a crooked way, shrouded in a stygian pitch, unable to see where they tread and ultimately doomed to stumbling. The concluding speech of the chapter, its third, once again exhorts the son to vigilance.

He must be attentive and incline his ear to the sayings of his father, not letting them out of his sight and carefully keeping them in his heart. The word jealously guarded in the heart is like the tablets of the law in the Ark of the Covenant. This is, the father assures him, nothing short of life and healing, like the tree of life to which wisdom was likened in the preceding chapter.

The wise words of the father must be found. They require the son to search them out, to pursue them, and to devote himself to them. Merely hearing them is not enough.

They cannot be carelessly possessed. Many people have much information in their brains, but they have never pursued wisdom in order to find it. Of preeminent importance is the guarding of the heart.

Everything flows from the heart. The heart is like the inner sanctuary. It is like the garden with a fountain from which the river flows out.

We are to be the gardeners, who keep and tend our own hearts like a hidden garden. The heart is the secret spring from which everything arises, and mastering it is our first, our greatest, and our most enduring task. The heart is exposed to the sight of God, but generally veiled to others.

We are often most concerned with how we appear in the sight of others, and will go to much effort to make ourselves appear righteous to our neighbour, little mindful of how we appear to the God who sees the hearts of men. However, the scripture charges us to be most vigilant and concerned with our hearts in the sight of God. As Robert Murray MacShane purportedly, but perhaps apocryphally, said, What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more.

The state of our heart is upstream from everything else. The pollution of our hearts will defile every one of our actions, or alternatively, its godliness can be a source of life to all who come into contact with us. From the heart upstream, the father concludes by looking downstream to the mouth, the eyes, and the feet.

Evil speech is described using similar language to that of the evil way. It is crooked, it is devious. It is not straightforward.

In Proverbs, it is the mouth that first reveals the state of the heart. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks, as our Lord says. In addition to the mouth, the eyes must be fixed on what is most important.

If your eyes are not fixed, you will not be walking in a straight way. The person whose attention is distracted, whose eyes are constantly diverted from the things that they ought to be focused upon, will always be in danger of stumbling. The movement from the well-guarded heart to the well-ordered eyes that are fixed on the things that really matter, to the foot that walks in the path of righteousness, is one that is very much in line with the message of Proverbs more generally.

One of the things being expressed in these verses is that the whole of the body must be coordinated in the task of righteousness, in the way of wisdom. A question to consider. How does this chapter's portrayal of wisdom differ from common portrayals within our current day? What might we learn from the contrast? 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. 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. 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 adulteress 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.

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 25-27.

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 adulteress 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. 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 vigour 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 thirties and forties. He has had many broken relationships, he is paying support for children from whom he has 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. 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 12-16, employs this imagery to speak about the bride. A garden larked is my sister, my bride, a spring larked, a fountain sealed.

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 choicest 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. 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.

The man who commits himself to one fountain, a well exclusive to himself, can enter into the fullness of the goodness of sex. He can drop his defences. He can become utterly intoxicated in a woman.

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.

By contrast, our promiscuous society is all about the emotional and physical prophylactics that prevent waters of life from flowing between people, that try to protect people from really getting intoxicated. 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.

When this is considered, being a one-woman man is seen to be the clear wise course. While being such a man involves resisting the law of the adulterous and other women, the Father suggests that the best way to resist such women is to delight even more fully in one's wife. 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.

He does not want to get too attached, she does not want to risk getting her heart broken. The faithful husband, however, is to become the lifelong lover of one woman, as she is free to let her life flow freely, always looking for ways to deepen and enjoy their bond more fully. 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. Sin entangles the sinner within it, and the sinner is caught in his own iniquities. The wicked man is the architect of his own destruction.

Wickedness is ultimately revealed to be folly, the result of proudly resisting instruction. A question to consider. How might this passage inform our reading of Song of Solomon as wisdom literature? From the discussion of the adulterous woman in Proverbs chapter 5, Proverbs 6 moves to some examples of foolish or wicked men in verses 1-19, before returning to the adulterous woman again at the end of the chapter.

Bruce Waltke argues that these warnings against wicked men are connected with the warning about the forbidden woman in the previous chapter, in a way that encourages the readers to perceive parallels and the severity of the danger in both the cases. The opening verses deal with a situation where the son has acted as a guarantor for another, a surety all of the other person's debts could be demanded of him if they were an aid on their duty of paying. This is a very dangerous position to put oneself in, through careless benevolence or some other motive.

The figures of the neighbour and the stranger in verse 1 seem to be parallel to each other in the literary structure of the text, however as figures they would seem to be contrasting. Perhaps stranger is a way of describing the neighbour whose character and reliability the guarantor has not adequately judged. Rash vows are dangerous things to

make and the son must beware of making them.

The person who makes such vows is caught in the snare of their own words. In such a situation matters are urgent and no time must be wasted. The son must immediately go to the neighbour for whom he has pledged himself a surety and must pester him until he pays the debt, lest the son be ruined on account of his neighbour's failure to pay up.

Until the debtor pays the debt, however, the son is like a gazelle or a bird that is in great peril of being caught and killed. Verses 6-11 warn the sluggard, the lazy man, against the consequences of his inaction. He is instructed to get up and go to look at the ant, learning a lesson from its industriousness.

It doesn't require direction or rule from some other party in order to gather its grain. While ants may have social organisation, they don't need leaders to press them into action. The ant does the necessary work in the necessary season.

The sluggard, by contrast, is difficult to rouse. The sluggard is always putting off what should be done immediately. He just wants a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands, putting his duties off for just that little bit longer, an indefinite period of time.

Time slips away from him, but then, all at once, the bitter consequence of his abandoned duties comes upon the dozing sluggard like a bandit, stripping him of all that he possesses. The sleep by which he puts off responsibilities and relaxes leaves him without the vigilance to guard himself, and poverty and want strike him unawares. In Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, one of the characters is asked how he went bankrupt.

Two ways, he answers, gradually and then suddenly. This is the experience of the sluggard. The process of falling into poverty comes slowly, and perhaps barely perceptibly, as he inches towards the precipice in his careless inattention, and then all of a sudden he is falling headlong, with the rock bottom rapidly approaching.

Verses twelve to nineteen describe another figure whose doom comes suddenly, this time the trouble-making rabble-rouser. He is a worthless fellow, a son of Belial, language that is used of various wicked men in Scripture, especially those who stir up strife and conflict. His primary mode of dealing is crooked speech, devious and deceptive language that distorts the truth and incites conflict.

His speech is accompanied by veiled motions, designed secretly to disclose his true intentions and beliefs to his fellows, or to dishonour authorities in their sight. His heart is perverted and set on malicious plans, for which the secret instigation of conflict is generally key. He unleashes discord, purposefully setting it loose and allowing it to do its mischief, while hiding his own hand.

However, like the sluggard, the downfall of such a man will be sudden and unexpected.

We are not told how his downfall will come about. It could be one of a great many ways.

Perhaps he is caught in the act of causing his trouble. Perhaps others conspire against him in the ways that he has conspired against them. Perhaps he is caught up in the discord that he has created and he is destroyed within it, as he hadn't realised the danger of the forces that he was playing with.

Perhaps what is in view here is a divinely delivered judgment. Whatever it is, he is not prepared for it, but it is certainly coming upon him. Verses 16-19 describe this figure of the troublemaker, taking up much of the language of the preceding verses, describing the perverse anatomy of such a man.

The form of the saying, there are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him, is designed rhetorically to amplify the hearer's sense of the Lord's abhorrence of the things about to be mentioned. Perhaps we can see a movement down through the body in verses 17-18, with the whole figure being summed up in verse 19. For this troublemaker the parts of his body have been so consistently devoted to these wicked activities that the wicked uses to which they have been put have twisted and determined their basic character.

The troublemaker's core sin is the breaking of the ninth commandment. He bears false witness against his neighbour, seeking by his words to encourage disputes and conflicts among brothers, to set people against each other. The concluding section of the chapter returns to the theme of the adulterous woman, with which the larger passage opened at the beginning of chapter 5. Here the son is charged to attend to the commandment of the father and the teaching of the mother.

It is important to note that the father and the mother are a unity, both of them are involved in the training of the son, both of them are active teachers, not just leaving the task to the other. We probably ought not to put much weight on the different words used for their teaching here. That said, paying attention to the bigger picture, there do seem to be important differences between the two.

Although modern people may often think that speakers are interchangeable, the same message given by different persons can have a very different force to it. When the father speaks to his son, he speaks to his son as one who was himself a son once, and he is speaking to one who will be a father in his own turn. The gendered character of that teaching is even more important on this particular subject.

The father is likely speaking as one with first-hand experience of the temptation and the resistance of the forbidden woman, and choosing the wife of his youth instead. The teaching of a father is an apprenticeship in manliness for his son, part of the son's initiation into the world of man, a training in virtue which the mother has a great importance of her particular input. The mother, on her part, speaks to her son, as she

does at the end of the Book of Proverbs, as one with greater personal insight into the character of various types of women, a sort of knowledge that the father does not have to the same degree.

The father does the overwhelming amount of the direct teaching of the son in Proverbs, but on several occasions we hear him supporting the teaching of his wife, strengthening her words both with his added witness and by his support for her instruction. The picture that emerges is one in which both parents actively collaborate in the moral training of their child, supporting each other in the task, while each speaking with a force that is particular to themselves in their motherly or fatherly capacity. At a few points in the Book of Proverbs, the son is instructed to have a close and constant relationship with the teaching of his parents.

In chapter 3, verses 1 to 3, My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments. For length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you.

Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart. And in verses 21 to 23 of that chapter, My son, do not lose sight of these.

Keep sound wisdom and discretion, and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble. If you lie down, you will not be afraid.

When you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. All of this recalls the command of Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 6 to 9 concerning the Torah. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The son who commits himself to his parents' teaching will be protected by it, even if he has not yet fully internalized it in the form of deeper understanding. Wisdom begins with fearing the Lord and honoring our parents, from which postures insight can slowly arise. The teaching of the good parents will form the child to the point where the lessons have become part of him.

These lessons will protect him from the wicked woman, and their words from her smooth and seductive speech. In verse 25, the father charges his son not to desire the beauty of the adulterous woman. We should observe the deepening of the command at this point.

It is not merely walking after the adulterous woman that is being warned against here, but desiring her. We are dealing with the tenth commandment here, the prohibition on

coveting, not merely the seventh, the prohibition on adultery. The warning against desiring such a woman is followed by several reasons.

Desiring such a woman is actually desiring your own destruction, if you see what it all entails. The first rationale for not desiring such a woman involves the contrast between the cost of a prostitute, who might in some cases be haggled down to the price of a single loaf of bread, and the adulterous woman, whose favors are seemingly freely given, but who may well cost a man his life when her husband discovers. It is worth recalling that Israel had a death penalty on adultery.

This argument definitely doesn't legitimate the use of prostitutes. Rather, it is highlighting the unconsidered costs of adultery, in particular the vengeance for wronged husband. The man who has relations with such a woman is, as the verses that follow make clear, playing with fire.

He will unavoidably be burned. The illustration of a thief is then brought forward. The severity of a thief's crime can be mitigated by a sense of his economic desperation.

If a starving thief steals food, people won't judge him that harshly. However, even such a thief may be required to pay back the full measure of what he has stolen, and much more besides. He may well be ruined by the restitution that he is expected to give.

If the consequences for such a thief's crimes are bitter, how much more those for the one who commits adultery? If he's lucky, he might get away with a severe beating. However, he may well lose his life, and while the starving thief won't face that strong of a moral judgment, the man who lies with the adulterous woman will be utterly shamed and disgraced. A betrayed husband is not the sort of person who will lightly forgive.

No matter what compensation the adulterous man offers, the vengeance of the betrayed husband will not easily be assuaged. A question to consider. The Seventh Commandment prohibits the committing of adultery.

The Book of Proverbs takes that commandment and unpacks it, relating it to the desiring of the forbidden woman, and explores all of the ways in which that sin grows from its first seed to its full expression and its bitter harvest. How might this fuller description help the wise son to put up guards against this sin, and more effectively to resist it? Proverbs chapter 7 contains the father's tenth speech, and another extended treatment of the danger of the forbidden woman. The focus on women competing for the attention of the young man in the opening chapters of Proverbs encourages us to recognize that wisdom, or the lack of it, is principally determined by those to whom you will give your heart.

The Book of Proverbs frequently moves between the personified women of wisdom and folly, and the concrete women the son might encounter, the adulteress, the prostitute,

and the wife of his youth. By moving between these figures, the reader is supposed to recognize, on the one hand, the fact that the pursuit of wisdom must be an affair of the heart, and on the other, the fact that all of the pursuits of love in the young man's life are ultimately to be understood as expressions of the fundamental quest for either wisdom or folly. A man who has given his heart to sensual pleasure, to the pursuit of many women, to a forbidden woman, or who has taken a foolish or wicked wife, will be compromised in his quest for wisdom, in a manner from which there is no easy recovery.

In his pursuit of such women, he has been listening to the call of folly herself. Those who have your heart have your devotion, your strength, and ultimately your life. This is one of the reasons why throughout the scripture there is such a concern that the people of God do not marry idolaters and unbelievers.

As the son moves towards young manhood, this question becomes a keen one. He will leave the immediate orbit of his father and mother, and there will be various powerful appeals to and claims upon his heart, principally from women. The choices that the young man makes in this area may make or break him.

Marry in haste, repent at leisure. A person can give their heart to the quest for true understanding in the fear of the Lord, something personified in Lady Wisdom, or they can give their heart to foolishness, personified in the figure of the woman Folly. However, one does not just give one's heart to the principles of wisdom or folly.

One also has to choose the various persons to whom one gives one's heart. If you are going to give your heart to wisdom and to trust, fear, and honour the Lord, that commitment of heart will determine the other people to whom you will give your love and devotion. The quest for wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

Next it involves the honouring of parents, and then choosing one's companions and those whom you will love. In choosing your companions, you are choosing the path that you are going to walk. Once you have chosen such a path, it is not easy to divert from it.

For this reason the father is very concerned that his son be alert to the forking paths that he will encounter. He wants to signpost their destinations, so that the son's decisions won't be determined by his desires in the moment alone. The taking of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was a decision made on account of the fruit's appealing and promising qualities, and the deceptive words of the serpent.

The forbidden woman will appear to the young man in a similarly attractive guise, and with many of the same deceptive words, she will mask her deathly aftertaste. If the son is able to understand the incipients of the sin of adultery, in all of its deceptive seduction, and connect this with its bitter end, he will be well forearmed against the forbidden woman when he encounters her. In the Book of Proverbs we move beyond the bare prohibitions of the law, and are given a more descriptive account of sin.

One of the arenas in which wisdom is most demonstrated is in knowledge of the ways that sin operates, and shrewd avoidance of it in all of its forms. Wisdom is one of our greatest weapons against sin. It helps us to recognise its paths and its dynamics more readily.

It makes it easier for us to avoid them. It enables us to develop strategies of avoidance, evasion, resistance and preparation, that make it less likely that we will find ourselves unwittingly wandering into struggles against sin on its own favoured ground. Chapter 7 opens with another charge to the son to devote his heart to the teaching of his father and to wisdom.

It will only be with such a devoted heart that the son will be prepared to withstand the temptation of the adulterous woman. Once again, the language here evokes the relationship that Israel was to have with the law of the Lord, the commandment and wisdom of its heavenly father. Another body of instruction that called for the love and the hearts of the people.

The purpose of devotion to the commandment is protective. The time will soon come when the words of the father compete with the smooth words of the forbidden woman for the son's obedience. If the words of the father have merely been for the son an unwelcome and onerous external constraint, he will soon shrug them off when the attractive adulteress crosses his path.

However, if he has delighted in the words of his father, internalised them in memory and in understanding, meditated upon them to the point of developing his own insight and formed his own personal relationship to wisdom through them, he will not abandon them when his father is absent. Once again, we should remember the failure of Adam and Eve in this same area and the way that their failure to trust and obey their heavenly father and to consider the goodness of his commandment made them susceptible to the serpent's wiles. The serpent's temptation began with the insinuation that the commandment of the Lord was not good, that the Lord was fundamentally withholding and legalistically restrictive towards his children.

And once Eve was persuaded that goodness was to be found outside of the commandment of the Lord, the course was set. The father paints the picture for the son. He has witnessed this playing out with a gullible young man and he wants to ensure that his son is not caught in the same snare.

So he gives his son an elaborate cautionary tale. The father as a wise man is a person who observes people and their actions. He has learned to size people up, to discern the causes of their different outcomes and to recognise some of the traits that betray their true character.

On one occasion he looked through the wooden shutters or the lattice of his window and

witnessed a scene playing out on the street below. The figure he sees is a young man among the sons. This is someone in his own son's position and time of life.

This young man is not going directly to the house of the adulterous woman. Rather he is aimlessly and carelessly striding by the corner where such women would most likely be found. He is the equivalent of a sinful youth wandering through the red light district.

He is doing so in the darkening time of the dusk, when the danger of the temptation is at its keenest. The father's painting of the scene lingers over and accents certain details. He wants his son to recognise what is likely a willful incaution on the part of the gullible young man.

The wise person is alert to the dangers of temptation and is very careful to avoid encountering them on the ground where they are the strongest. While it may not be a sin in and of itself to walk by the corner that the prostitute is on at dusk, it is often an indication of at least gullibility but more likely also willful and hence sinful resistance to the warnings of wisdom. The wise man, in his struggles with sin, is very wary of the occasions where temptation's strength is keenest.

Perhaps it is certain company. Perhaps it is when he is in solitude. Perhaps it is when he is tired or in a mood to self-pity.

Perhaps it is when he is aimlessly killing time online. The wise man recognises that sin is like fire. It requires fuel, heat and oxygen.

He is very mindful of those places where there is fuel for sin, where sinful activities are near at hand, where willing companions in sin might be found. He is alert to those places where the heat of sin is present, those times and places and persons around which or around whom he feels his sinful passions aroused. He recognises the forms of oxygen that sin can be given, privacy and secrecy, excessive or unchecked power and other such things.

The fuel, the heat and the oxygen that sin require are often not sinful things in and of themselves, but the wise person recognises the danger of a culpable negligence when negotiating their interactions. For the young man in the father's account, the temptation comes quickly upon him. He didn't go seeking for her, but he foolishly put himself in danger's path.

The suddenness of the woman's arrival, the way that she comes upon the unprepared young man, is conveyed in the words, And behold, all at once she is there, and when she is there she doesn't just quietly present herself to the man. She takes him by surprise, she throws him off his balance, she presses and cajoles him, she grabs him and kisses him. If the young man lingers a moment more, the trap that has been sprung will be impossible for him to escape.

Sin isn't waiting around asking for his permission. Nothing short of firm resistance and running away will deliver him. We might here recall the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

The father was attentive to the gullible young man. He was also attentive to the appearance, character and behaviour of the woman. Her dress communicates something of her moral character and intent.

She is dressed like a harlot, flaunting her body, using such a display to arouse the man's lust, so that the heat of his passions might meet the fuel of her sinful intent. Her dress is designed to weaken his resistance. The father can see that she is cunning and streetwise.

She is a shrewd judge of the foolish man's nature. She knows just how to catch him. In the description of her as watchful or wily, we have a window into a reason why wisdom is so essential.

The wicked have their own forms of wisdom and cunning. They also have insight into the world and into human behaviour. The serpent was more crafty than any of the other beasts, and sinful people like this woman are shrewd, skilled at deceiving, trapping and outwitting others.

Faced with many serpents seeking to deceive, tempt and devour us, we need to have a wisdom that matches theirs, by which we will be able to escape them. In our battle against sin, a simple goodness, the innocence of infants, is not enough. When battling against sin in our lives, we shouldn't merely be flexing our moral muscles.

We should also be using our wits and wisdom to avoid stumbling into temptation, to forearm ourselves for when it comes upon us, to know when and where to expect it, to ensure that we face it on the firmest footing we can. When our minds are at their clearest, we should be developing plans to tackle sin, temptation and testing in our lives. We need to plan and prepare for crisis before the crisis hits.

The father continues his description of the adulteress and her manner. She is loud and unruly, someone who is manifestly driven by passions and not self-controlled. Her feet do not stay at home.

She is restless and unsettled. This is seen in the way that she wanders and lurks all over town, in the street, in the market, at the corner. Wherever gullible young men might aimlessly be making their way, she is prowling and waiting to pounce, hoping to divert them.

She is shameless and brazen, seeking to overcome the young man with the boldness of her seduction. Any hesitation on the man's part, any indecision he might flirt with, will be ruthlessly exploited by her. In verses 14-20, the father records her appeal to the young

man.

She tells a tale to him. She presents herself as a devotee of a Canaanite fertility cult. She has made communion sacrifices and would have food in her house.

The rituals would be consummated in sexual relations. She has set everything up. She has prepared her bed with the finest sheets and with costly perfumes.

All she needs is a young man to share it with. She flatters the young man by giving the impression that he is exactly the man for whom she was looking. She has eagerly sought him.

He isn't like the others. What great fortune that she has found him! She paints an alluring picture. He can stay with her all night without fear.

They can enjoy each other all night without worrying about being caught. Further to assure him, she tells him that her husband has gone away on a long journey. He is far away.

He plans to stay away for a long and definite period. He has taken money with him, so he is clearly on a business trip. This sin is all the more attractive because it has no consequences attached.

The man is now hooked, and all that the woman needs to do is to reel him in. She turns him aside from the way with her speech, aside from his actual path, but also from the path of righteousness. She speaks smoothly, but that speech compels or forcibly drives him.

The father compares the gullible young man to a doomed animal. He is trapped, but he doesn't yet fully appreciate the severity of his situation. He doesn't realize that he is about to be killed.

Having painted this extended portrait of the forbidden woman, the father concludes by underlining the importance of attention to his words once again. With the same note of urgency with which he began this speech, the forbidden woman is an apex predator. Countless men have fallen into her clutches.

Her house is like a den filled with dead men's bones, and those who venture into it will find that it is dark, crooked, and that its uneven paths descend to shield itself. The son is cautioned to guard his heart and his feet against straying into her ways. He must be respectful of the danger that she represents, and give her an extremely wide berth.

A question to consider. Looking at our own lives in terms of the factors that invite the fires of sin, what are the areas of greatest danger, and what are some concrete steps that we personally can take to reduce this danger in our own lives? Proverbs chapter 7

presented us with the forbidden woman and her appeal to the gullible young man in the street. The young man's choice of a woman is a prominent theme throughout the opening nine chapters of the book of Proverbs.

It functions as a theme that frames the entirety of the book. Chapter 8 presents us with another woman making her appeal to the son, Lady Wisdom. Her appeal here recalls her initial appeal of chapter 1 verses 20 to 21.

Wisdom cries aloud in the street. In the market she raises her voice. At the head of the noisy street she cries out.

At the entrance of the city gate she speaks. Bruce Waltke argues, despite their contrasting styles, that we should read this chapter with the preceding chapter as a diptych. Two panels that need to be read alongside each other.

Wisdom's appeal is contrasted with that of the adulterous woman in chapter 7. Waltke writes, The unchaste wife moves covertly at dusk and speaks falsely. Wisdom moves publicly and speaks direct and authoritative truth. Unlike the smooth, seductive, but deceptive speech of the strange woman, Wisdom's is straight, right, and true, not twisted or crooked.

The foreign wife leads her victims to slavery, impoverishment, and death. Wisdom's speech leads her followers to kingship, wealth, and life. The foreign wife inhabits the earthly and mundane.

Wisdom soars in heaven above space and time. Both rub shoulders in the city and appeal for the love of the uncommitted, gullible youth. The unchaste wife erotically.

Wisdom spiritually. The house of the unfaithful wife is a death trap. The mansion of Wisdom is the abundant life.

A critical decision to love Wisdom before entering the city is urgent to nerve the putty-like simpleton against the foreign woman. To gain his love, Wisdom extols her virtues and her rewards. In the juxtaposition of the appeal of the forbidden woman and of Lady Wisdom, the hearer is encouraged to allow the comparison of Wisdom to a woman addressing a young man in search of love to inform the understanding both of the nature of the quest for Wisdom and the nature of the quest for love.

The quest for Wisdom has the character of a pursuit of the heart. Wisdom requires the devotion of one's desires and affections to her, not merely brain power. Where the heart is not set upon Lady Wisdom, the smartest mind will give itself to tangled webs of rationalizations and lies.

Likewise, the quest for Wisdom requires an appropriate attitude to matters of love. When the young man goes out in search of love, he is, whether he recognizes it or not,

pursuing either the woman Folly or Lady Wisdom. There are few more important matters than the question of the person to whom you will give your heart.

And this is a question that the young man will unavoidably face as he seeks to leave his father and mother and be joined to a wife. If he chooses the wrong woman, he will be caught in her folly. One of the tragedies of King Solomon was that, despite his surpassing wisdom, his heart was turned away by his wives, as we see in 1 Kings 11 1-4.

There we learn that his wives turned away his heart. His love for his many wives led him to serve other gods, and his heart was not true to the Lord. On the other hand, if a man marries a wise wife, she can be the making of him, confirming him in the path of wisdom herself, whose character she displays.

The wise wife is the man's great counselor, the one who will encourage and give him companionship on the path of righteousness. Wisdom's address, with which this chapter opens, is given in a raised voice, at the heights by the way, maybe on the top of the walls. It's at the crossroads, beside the gates, and at the entrance of the doors.

Wisdom speaks to those who are on the way, especially at the places where directions are chosen and where people enter in or go out. These are sites of decision and transition. Her address is to the simple and to the fools.

The simple are those who are untaught, gullible, naive or unformed. The fools are those who are culpably ignorant, who are not merely immature, but those who have adopted, to some degree or other, the path of folly. The simple are spoken to as those who need to be taught prudence.

The fools as those who need to receive instructive correction. In verses 6-11, Wisdom presents her hearers with reasons why they should listen to her. Her hearers should be attentive, because her speech is a source of what is right, good, beautiful and true, as she abhors and rejects all evil.

None of her words are twisted or deceptive. Everyone with understanding will find her to be a sure guide. In this description, the hearer learns Wisdom's character and the fact that her words can be trusted and relied upon.

The rewards of heeding her are immense. The value of her instruction exceeds that of the costliest metals and jewels. She is incomparable in her worth, and a man should value her above everything else in his heart.

It is worth noting at this point that descriptions given of Lady Wisdom at such points get taken up later in chapter 31 and referred to the excellent wife. For instance, in verse 10 of that chapter, an excellent wife who can find, she is far more precious than jewels. In verses 12-14, she enumerates her qualities and gifts.

She is intimately associated with knowledge and discretion. Knowledge is a grasp of reality and its operations. Discretion is shrewdness in deliberation and in the forging of plans.

This is a quality that can be expressed in righteous and wicked ways. At various points in the book, the wicked are said to have this particular quality. Earlier in the book, we were told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Here, the fear of the Lord is connected with the hatred of evil. The antithesis of such hatred of evil is revealed in the second half of verse 13. Pride, arrogance, the way of evil, and perverted speech.

The fear of the Lord is characterized by humility, but also by an abhorrence of what is contrary to his character. Those who are proud and arrogant will always find folly most palatable. It flatters them and it confirms them in their ways.

The fool always wants to be confirmed in his own way. He has little interest in the difficult task of seeking out the right way. Wisdom communicates counsel, effective strategy, perception and insight, and strength.

The person with wisdom is greatly strengthened by her. Kings reign by her because effective rule and power requires insight. The reception of counsel, knowing how to act so as to have the desired results.

The wise king may accomplish more with wisdom by his side than a foolish king with vast armies. Wisdom also grants judges and lawgivers insight into what is right in situations that are obscure and veil to others. The wise man can bring wise words to bear upon a situation in ways that pierce the gloom and throw once veiled matters into a clear light.

We might here think of Solomon's judgment concerning the two prostitutes in the dispute over the child. If the son wishes to be powerful, effective and just, he must pursue wisdom. If the young man is called to love wisdom, wisdom assures him that if he seeks her, she will be found by him and that his love will be reciprocated.

The statements here should remind us of those in chapter 3, verses 13-18. Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Long life is in her right hand, in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her, those who hold her fast are called blessed.

Wisdom's lovers are rewarded with her remarkable gifts and bounty. Wisdom is desirable in herself, but also desirable on account of the rich blessings that she offers. Her

treasures are with her, enjoyed by those who cleave to her, but lost by those who abandon her.

Those who pursue wealth without wisdom will often seek it through wickedness or violence, like the young man who joins the gang in chapter 1. Such persons will often only enjoy wealth for a short season, until in their folly they surrender it. The righteous man who seeks wisdom above all else can enjoy enduring wealth as a consequence of his quest. Even though this is not what he was most focused on achieving, wisdom grants such a blessing to her lovers.

In the description of wisdom back in chapter 3, the description of her value and of the riches that she offers is followed by the following statement in verses 19-20. The Lord by wisdom founded the earth. By understanding he established the heavens.

By his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds dropped down the dew. Here in chapter 8, wisdom moves to discussing her part in the original creation, her primordial character. If the Lord created by wisdom, it makes sense that all effective action in the world must occur according to her.

Here we are told that the Lord brought forth wisdom at the outset of his creation, the very first act of his founding of the world. She was established in her rule, even before the earth came into being, when all was still formless and void. As the Lord fashioned the creation, wisdom was right beside him, constantly alongside him, delighting in his work.

The meaning of verse 30 is debated by scholars. Many translations and scholars argue that wisdom is presented as a master workman. Others, like Leo Perdue, argue that it is not a reference to wisdom as a master craftsman or artisan, but wisdom as a little child that rejoices and dances before the Lord.

Wisdom is personified as a sort of child brought forth by the Lord that plays exuberantly throughout his creation. Michael Fox, in a particular version of this understanding, argues that it should be understood as saying, I was with him growing up, wisdom being described as like a daughter of the Lord. Waltke argues for wisdom being constantly or faithfully before the Lord.

Others have argued that wisdom here is spoken of as the instrument of the Lord. I find Fox's interpretation, I was with him growing up, to be the most compelling. The Lord delights in this daughter-like wisdom, and wisdom rejoices before him.

The portrayal of wisdom here emphasises the youth, the playfulness and the vivacity of wisdom. Fox writes, The counsellor's satisfaction in working through a dilemma, the author's elation in the success of effort, and the scholar's exhilaration in partaking of the law and learning of tradition, in exploring the unknown, and in growing in knowledge. Perhaps the joy of learning is what the author primarily has in mind, since he is directing

his words in the first instance to young men who need encouragement in their pursuit of learning.

Wisdom, for the Book of Proverbs, is delightful. It itself is a principle of delight. The Lord delights in wisdom, and those who pursue wisdom will find her to be a source of great joy.

Wisdom has a particular relationship with humanity. Of all of the creatures of the Lord, it is humanity in particular that can enter into a relationship with wisdom. This theme is developed in later wisdom literature, for instance in the Book of Wisdom or the Wisdom of Solomon, written in the 1st century BC.

In chapter 8, verses 2 and following, we read, Nothing is better than wisdom, who has given shape to everything that exists. Do you love justice? All the virtues are the result of wisdom's work. Justice and courage, self-control and understanding.

Life can offer us nothing more valuable than these. Do you want to have wide experience? Wisdom knows the lessons of history, and can anticipate the future. She knows how to interpret what people say, and how to solve problems.

She knows the miracles that God will perform, and how the movements of history will develop. So I decided to take wisdom home to live with me, because I knew that she would give me good advice, and encourage me in times of trouble and grief. The writer continues this theme in verses 17 to 18, Then I was determined to take wisdom as my bride.

The sort of figure that wisdom represents has been a matter of considerable debate over the history of the Church. Is wisdom an actual entity, or just some sort of personification? If it is an actual entity, is it personal or quasi-personal? Is it a divine entity or being? Is it a personification of an attribute of God? Is it one of the persons of the Trinity? If it is a personification, what reality justifies this personification? Historically, many have associated the figure of wisdom with the second person of the Trinity, the Son, and with the principle of the Logos. The identification of wisdom in this passage with Christ was a very commonly held position among the patristic writers, and Proverbs chapter 8 played an important role in debates about the deity of Christ.

Not all patristic writers identified wisdom with the Son, however. For instance, Irenaeus in Book 4, chapter 20 of *Against Heresies* identifies wisdom with the Spirit. Imagery has its own logic and grammar, and gendered imagery is a good example of this.

It can be tempting for modern readers to believe that we can take an a la carte approach to biblical imagery. However, imagery is chosen very carefully. It has certain connotations.

In scripture, male and female consistently stand for different things. Men and women are

fundamentally different in their symbolic potential. Fox asks the right sort of questions when he considers what would be lost if wisdom here was a man? What if wisdom was the Lord's firstborn son, calling mankind to listen to him? Fox immediately notes two things that would be lost.

He writes, the first loss would be the tint of eros in the mutual attraction of wisdom and humanity in chapters 8 and 9. The alternative male figure, he writes, would lack an eros-like attraction to match the draw of Lady Folly, whose slattern call emulates the explicitly sexual pull of the strange woman. He goes on, a deeper difference would be that this personage would inevitably acquire a different kind of authority, one not quite suitable for describing the way wisdom works in the world. A male with Lady Wisdom's qualities would be too much like a monarch.

A firstborn son of God would be like his deputy, like the Davidic king in Zion, who rules the kings and the judges of the earth through his God-given might, and who not only teaches justice, but actively executes it. Lady Wisdom is not a king figure. She is powerful, and she is the principle of just dominion, but she does not herself exercise rulership.

Instead, others rule by her. Her influence is verbal, working through persuasion and appeal to affection, not through exercise of office and power. Her power and appeal come from the just workings of the universe, and the good sense of individual minds, rather than from the constraints and compulsions of political institutions.

As we go through the Book of Proverbs, we see Wisdom presented as a wise wife, as one who is a grand hostess, as a lover who appeals to young men, as someone who builds her house and provides for people. The Book of Proverbs is about the relationship between the royal son and Wisdom. It's framed in terms of the quest for a good wife.

The book juxtaposes the way of folly, the foolish woman that leads to destruction, with Lady Wisdom and the noble wife, who should both be desired and sought. The book ends with the portrait of the noble wife. Lady Wisdom is a sort of royal consort.

The prince's relationship with Wisdom is presented as erotic in character. It's comparable to the relationship between a man and his wife. The figure of Wisdom, or Sophia, has inspired a great deal of theological speculation.

I do not believe that it is appropriate to think of Sophia or Wisdom as a divine person, nor do I think that we should identify this figure with the sun. Nevertheless, I think that the figure of Wisdom represents a personification of something real, perhaps best thought of as the operations of the Holy Spirit within the world. The Holy Spirit gives life and breath to all things, the exuberance, the vitality, the delight and the dynamics of life are all established by the imminent working of the Spirit that animates the whole creation.

Those who are anointed by the Spirit have wisdom and live with the grain of the creation. Christ is the Logos, the Word, the one who gives structure and order to the creation. He is also the Royal Son, who receives the Spirit without measure.

The Holy Spirit is His Spirit, the one who indwells and animates. The Holy Spirit is not wisdom. However, wisdom is, I believe, one way of speaking about the imminent work of the Holy Spirit within the creation.

In the verses that conclude this chapter, Wisdom drives home her message. Reminding her hearers of the blessedness of those who walk in her ways, she charges her hearers to heed her and not to neglect her words. They must be devoted to her on a daily basis.

Every day they must wait at her gates and by her doors. Perhaps we are to associate this with the Feast of Wisdom in the following chapter. She declares, The significance of this verse becomes more apparent when we read chapter 18, verse 22.

In her devastating final sentence, Wisdom declares that all who hate her love death. They may not think it. They may think that they love freedom and autonomy.

But when the time comes, it will be revealed that what they were really pursuing all that time was death and their own destruction. As we saw in chapter 1, when that destruction comes upon them, Wisdom will mock at them. A question to consider, where else in the scripture might we see the figure of Wisdom or other figures related to her? Proverbs chapter 9 concludes the prologue of the Book of Proverbs.

Especially towards the latter half of the prologue, the juxtaposition of the foolish woman and Lady Wisdom is pronounced. This was the case in the preceding two chapters, where there was a diptych with the forbidden woman accosting the young man at the dusk on the street in chapter 7 and Lady Wisdom in chapter 8. Chapter 9 draws the juxtaposition between these figures to its height, presenting us with a diptych of Lady Wisdom and the now personified woman Folly. In such a diptych, two adjacent passages of scripture need to be read alongside each other, as they present two related things that can be mapped onto each other in a manner that accentuates the similarities and the differences.

An example of a diptych in biblical narrative would be Genesis chapter 18 and 19. These are two passages concerned with hospitality. Both begin with a similar yet contrasting encounter, an offer of hospitality.

One of the accounts ends with a barren wife being made fruitful, and the other with a wife being turned into a pillar of salt. Reading the two accounts separately, you can see a lot, but if you read the two accounts together, you can see a lot more. In this chapter, there is another diptych with two offers of hospitality.

These are closely paralleled invitations in verses 1-6 and 13-18. These also frame some instruction in the intervening verses. Bruce Waltke observes the tight structure that both

Wisdom and Folly's invitations share.

These move from the preparation of a meal, which can be broken down into the designation of the figure, their activity and attributes, the call, and the location, to the invitation, to the gullible, to the brainless, and an offer of symbolic foods, to the conclusion of either life or death. The image behind all of this is, as Michael Fox notes, life as a banquet or feast. Connecting Wisdom and Folly with the offer of food might also bring the hearer's mind back to the Garden of Eden and the forbidden fruit.

A feast forms a bond of communion between the host, the guest, and their companions at the table, and such a meal would be part of the formalisation of a covenant. Eating is a source of sustenance and life, but eating bad food can have very damaging effects. As a metaphor, eating is often closely associated with sexual relations.

The fact that we have two women offering invitations to their meals in this chapter suggests an offer of intimacy, which, even if not sexual, implies something of the closeness and the union that we would associate with that. The image of a woman building her house by wisdom is found at a couple of points in the later chapters of Proverbs. In Proverbs 14, verse 1, the wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down.

Proverbs 24, verses 3-4, by wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established. By knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a similar image of building a house by wisdom, contrasting the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the man building it upon the sand.

The house here is not so much the physical edifice as the household. The wise woman in Proverbs is a woman who oversees and establishes her household as a site of social influence and industry. The modern household is typically relegated to the margins of society.

It is a realm of shared consumption and retreat, of leisure and recharging for a small family whose members spend the significant majority of their days outside of it and of its orbit. The household described here is quite different, however. It would be more like a small business, a centre of community life and activity, a place of hospitality and conviviality, a realm for an extended family and their life together, and much else besides.

The wise woman would be like the queen and the creator of this realm, and Lady Wisdom is here the great mistress of her household and the great hostess. Her house has seven pillars, it is spacious and grand, and the number perhaps recalls Wisdom's part in the original creation with its seven days. Whether this is the case or not, the number suggests completeness and perfection.

She prepares a great and bounteous banquet for her guests, slaughtering or perhaps overseeing the slaughter of cattle, mixing wine, presumably with honey, herbs and spices, and preparing a great table. She sends out her servant girls to summon guests to her feast. They are servant girls rather than male servants, or servants of both sexes, in order to associate them more strongly with Wisdom herself.

We should also consider the way in which actual women are associated with Wisdom and folly, and in the young man's choice of a wife, he may ultimately be pursuing either the invitation of wisdom or of folly. They call out from the highest part of the town. Perhaps the walls of the town are intended here.

Alternatively, we might think of a hill at the heart of a town, where a religious site might be situated. Wisdom's invitation is extended to the simple and to those lacking sense. These are people who are untaught and unformed, who need instruction and have to commit themselves to a particular path.

They are not yet fools in need of correction, but nor are they on the path of Wisdom. Wisdom summons them to turn to her in her house and to commune with her. Receiving the invitation requires a turning aside from their current path and entering into communion.

They must leave their simple ways and walk in the way of insight instead. The meal offered is bread and mixed wine. This is one of several occasions in the Old Testament where bread and wine come together, and we should not be reluctant to connect this to the meal to which our Lord invites us as His followers.

The invitation is generally and freely offered to all, as in Isaiah chapter 55, verses 1-2. Verses 7-12 intervene between the invitation of Lady Wisdom and of the woman Folly. In these verses we have a contrast between the teachability of the wise man and the unteachability of the scoffer and the wicked man.

The scoffer inures himself against instruction. He responds to any instruction or rebuke with mockery. The mockery insulates him against correction.

It is a way of deflecting anything that would challenge him in his path. Like the scoffer, the wicked man strikes out at the person who would try to correct him. He is not willing to hear.

The more that you rebuke a scoffer, the more that he will hate you. Indeed, the effort to try and teach such a person or to rebuke him can be counterproductive. It hardens and confirms him in his way as he reacts against you.

Often it's best to disengage from people who are acting in folly because you'll just make their situation worse. They won't listen to you. They won't receive any correction.

By the starkest contrast, the wise man loves reproof. He is one who receives reproof gladly. Any correction enables him to commit himself even more fully to the way of wisdom.

The wise man grows through correction and instruction. While some wicked people might devote their skills to avoiding the task of learning wisdom, the wise man devotes his wisdom to the learning of more wisdom. At the centre of this section is the great thesis statement, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Such a fear of the Lord corresponds to the knowledge of the holiness of God. The fear of the Lord involves a reverence and awe before the Lord and also a corresponding humility and teachableness on the part of the worshipper. The consequence of such a posture, which is the way by which someone can find wisdom, is the multiplication of someone's days and the adding of years to their life.

Even if the fool lives for as long as the wise man, he wastes his time. He squanders his days and his life in ignorance. The life of the wise man, by contrast, is enriched and grows through his wisdom.

His days and years are characterised by accumulation. In verse 13 we reach the characterisation of the woman folly. To this point we've had the concrete foolish woman, the forbidden woman who appeals to the gullible young man in the street, in chapter 7. But here, behind the concrete forbidden woman, is the woman folly.

She personifies the appeal of foolishness. Reading this as a diptych with the invitation of wisdom helps us to notice significant features of the characterisation of folly. She has built no house for herself, she has prepared no great feast, she is boisterous and ruly and brazen, and her appeal is through an ignorant seduction.

She has no servants to send out, she has to do all the appealing herself. She loudly cries out from a seat by her door and from a raised seat on the high places of the town. She is similar to wisdom in some respects, but also quite different, and her invitation is of the same type, whoever is simple let him turn in here, and addressing those who lack sense.

She is calling to the same people as wisdom is calling to. They are competing for the attention of these people. Wisdom offered bread and wine, but folly offers stolen water and bread eaten in secret.

She does not have the slaughtered cattle, the beautiful laid table, she does not have the mixed wine of Lady Wisdom. And so all she can offer is simple fare, however the appeal is the forbidden character. The water is stolen and the bread is eaten in secret.

Her food would not be anywhere near as appealing were it not so illicit. Precisely because the things that she offers are illegitimate, they are sweet and pleasant. It is

precisely because they are forbidden that they are so desirable.

Such is the perversity of rebellion. However, the simple person who turns aside at her invitation does not realise the folly of his choice. The contrast between wisdom and folly is ultimately the contrast between life and death.

Wisdom adds years to people's lives, but folly brings them down to death. Even if they live, they are bound by her. Her offer of freedom and pleasure ultimately turns out to be hollow.

True pleasure and freedom is found only in the way of wisdom. A question to consider. How does this closing passage of the prologue help to sum up the prologue's themes? In Proverbs chapter 10, a new body of material in the book begins.

The prologue that frames the main body of the book is now over, and we enter the Proverbs of Solomon proper. Proverbs are brief statements of truth. They can be observations, exhortations or other sorts of declarations.

And they must be used properly, in the right time and circumstance. Proverbs chapter 15, verse 23 says, To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is! There are conditions for the truth of a proverb that must be understood. The same words spoken in different contexts can be wise or foolish.

The words in the right time really matter. We have an example of this in Proverbs chapter 26, verses 4 and 5, where there are two statements that seem exactly opposite, that are placed directly next to each other. They invite us to consider the time and the context in which they are true.

In the mouths of the wise, proverbs are powerful, but in the mouths of fools, they are destructive and foolish. Improperly used, proverbs can be useless or damaging. Proverbs chapter 26, verse 7 says, Like a lame man's legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

And in Proverbs chapter 26, verse 9, Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard, is a proverb in the mouth of fools. The proverbs of this book are poetic, and usually have a terser form in Hebrew than they do in translation. They often are formed using parallelism.

There are two statements held next to each other that are paralleled in some way. The literary form of the proverb is not superfluous. It's part of the means by which the proverb makes its meaning, and invites the reader to reflect.

Most of the material of the book of Proverbs, from chapter 10 to chapter 31, is using this parallelism as a form of the proverb. There are a few varieties of parallelism. We can see examples of antithetical parallelism.

For instance, Proverbs chapter 15, verse 5. A fool despises his father's instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent. The proverb is like two poles of a magnet. You have the negative statement, and then you have the positive statement.

Or you have a positive statement, and then a negative statement. The relationship between these two statements can often be surprising. The parallel form invites us to reflect upon the parallel statements alongside of each other, to see what elements map onto each other, and what is implied by the similarities and contrasts.

These also aid memorization. They're often clearly composed for the ear, and have a memorable quality in the Hebrew. The sound of such proverbs can often accentuate their meaning.

The oppositions can be strengthened, or the parallels reinforced by the poetry and the sound of key opposed or compared terms. A further example of parallelism can be seen in better-than proverbs. Some examples of this can be found in verses 16 and 17 of chapter 15.

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it. There are forms of parallelism using like, chapter 25 verse 26.

Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked. There are a number of parallelisms, for instance in Proverbs chapter 30 verses 18 to 19. Three things are too wonderful for me.

Four I do not understand. The way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin. Many commentators hold that there is some sort of structure in this part of the book, but there is little agreement about what that structure might be.

K.M. Haim, for instance, sees clusters. There are indeed points in these Proverbs where there are key themes that are being expounded upon in successive Proverbs, and reading the Proverbs alongside each other can serve to illuminate. At other points there are verbal features that clearly connect different Proverbs together.

For instance, in the opening section of chapter 16, where there is the repetition of the name of the Lord in about nine successive verses. There are different poetic levels of signification that Bruce Waltke notes when we're looking through the Proverbs. There are sounds, there are syllables, there are words, there are phrases, there are half-verses or versets, there are verses or lines, there are strophes, and proverb pairs.

There are stanzas or subunits, there are poems or units, there are sections, and then there are collections. Meaning and order can operate on each one of these different levels. Sometimes a proverb's meaning is conveyed in part by the sound of key words.

At other points it's two related versets that really give the meaning. At other junctures it's a succession of Proverbs alongside each other that help to unpack a particular topic. We should be attending to each one of these levels of meaning as we're going through the book.

The use of poetry in the Book of Proverbs is important. The meaning of Scripture and the wisdom of Scripture is conveyed in large measure through literary artistry. This is a matter of beauty and delight, but also of subtlety and insight.

Such literary artistry rewards the attentive and those who know how to notice things with wisdom. Knowledge is conveyed not just through informational prose, and this should shape our attitude and approach to the Bible more generally. The elevation of language is not just decorative.

Literary artistry captures dimensions of reality itself. It evokes and invites contemplation. It projects the world in ways that touch the deepest roots of the imagination.

Craig Bartholomew and Ryan O'Dowd speak of Old Testament wisdom as action-forming poetry. They write, The delight of literary play amid the urgency of a worldview aflame with a sense of God is entirely congruent. This is not just poetry for poetry's sake.

It evokes a world charged with the glory of God and summons us to live in this world. Understanding the parallelisms and the use of poetry more generally in the book in light of this invites us to reflect upon the world in specific ways. Parallelisms can reinforce, they can compare, they can contradict, they can contrast.

The teaching of this book is wrapped in powerful and witty metaphors, in pithy proverbs, in provocative parallelisms, in lively analogies, and in things like the grand personification of the characters of wisdom and folly. While the proverbs are written and gathered in a collection, we are invited to reflect upon them, to speak about them, to deploy them at the appropriate times. In this way, they will serve to deliver their wisdom to us.

The superscription that opens this section covers the proverbs from chapter 10 verse 1 to chapter 22 verse 16. The second half of verse 1 is an introductory proverb to this section. It speaks about the formation and training of the son.

Waltke notices patterns in the ordering of the pairing. Father is in the first verset, mother in the second, and this is more general where that pairing occurs. The ordering of the antithesis likewise.

Wise in the first verset, foolish in the second, and again, that is more typical of the ordering. This introduces the material that follows in a way that foregrounds the place that the teaching of wisdom plays in the relation between the son and his parents. This accumulates motivations for faithfulness.

The foolish son rejects the legacy of wisdom that the parents want to pass on. He brings grief to his parents. The concern to honour one's parents and to bring them delight should be a further encouragement to wisdom.

Verses 2 to 5 form a chiasm with verse 1. It ends as the second half of verse 1 begins, with the theme of bringing shame or pleasure to parents. As we look through these verses, we'll also see, in the way that they order their antithetical parallelisms, that there are pairs of positive or negative statements that connect successive verses together. So, for instance, verse 3 begins with a positive statement, then has a negative, and then verse 4 starts with a negative statement, and then has a positive.

These verses cluster around the themes of wealth and poverty, and the corresponding themes of diligence and laziness. The source of wealth matters. Wicked wealth is cursed.

It will not ultimately prosper the person who gains it. We might here think about Jesus' teaching about storing up treasure in heaven, or the parable of the rich fool. Verse 3 develops verse 2. The Lord's righteous providence is at work within the world.

It upholds and enforces the moral order of his world, and ensures that the righteous are blessed, while the wicked are frustrated. We might think here also of the fourth beatitude in Matthew 5, verse 6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. It's not immediately obvious what such a proverb means.

It spurs us to reflection. We might think, there are a lot of righteous people who do seem to be poor, who do not seem to prosper, and a lot of wicked people who really do seem to gain wealth. Much as the psalmist reflects upon these matters in Psalm 37, we might be provoked to think about the way in which this statement might be true.

It is true, obviously, in an ultimate sense. Those who lay up treasures in heaven will ultimately be blessed, but those who just build up wealth on earth will find that it comes to nothing, and it does not profit them at the end. However, it is likely true in a less than ultimate sense as well.

Even within this present age, we can see many ways in which the Lord satisfies the hunger of his people, while frustrating the wicked, even in their gain. Proverbs shouldn't be absolutized in many cases. The righteous can definitely be poor, but laziness still causes poverty in a way that righteousness does not.

Verses 4 and 5 take on this theme, and returning to the character of the shame-bringing son, they speak of the way that the person who does not answer with diligence to the urgency of the present situation will bring dishonor and loss to those who are closest to him. Speech and words are in the center of the frame in verses 6 to 14. In verse 6, we see that blessings come upon the head of the righteous.

Those in community with them declare benedictions concerning them. The righteous prosper and advance the community, so the community seeks their good and wishes them well. By contrast, the wicked bring violence back upon themselves.

The way that the mouth of the wicked conceals violence might be a reference to the violence within them that they spread throughout the community around them. Alternatively, it might be a reference to the violence that comes back over them and overwhelms them. Their mouths are silenced as they are overwhelmed by the violence that they have caused in the community.

Verse 7 continues the theme. A common contrast between the wise and the foolish is the contrast between the babbling lips and the wise heart. The wise heart is the inner core of the person that has been formed by the truth.

The wise speak from the heart, from a settled interior that has been formed by the word of God. By contrast, the babbling fool is someone who is defined by non-stop speech which has no relationship with the depth of heart. The words of a fool spring so quickly to his lips because they have never been weighed in his heart.

In verse 10, the babbling fool is connected with the figure of the troublemaker. In Proverbs, wisdom is obtained through the proper reception of words. We listen to instructors, we accept reproof, we resist flattery.

The world is not understood merely through experience but as it is metabolised into sound words. Our posture towards this is absolutely crucial within the understanding of Proverbs. Once again in verse 11, we are told about the mouth of the wicked that conceals violence.

The mouth of the righteous leads to blessings coming upon his head but is also here compared to a fountain of life. The speech of the righteous refreshes and sustains those who are around them in community. This is seen, for instance, in not spreading gossip.

Hatred stirs up strife through the angry and inciting words of the wicked or perhaps through the gossip and rumours that they spread around. By contrast, the person who is loving covers over things, does not needlessly put his neighbour to shame. Verse 13 juxtaposes the wise lips of the person who has understanding and the back of the fool who lacks sense.

In the parallel, perhaps we see something of the contrast between the agency that the wise person enjoys. His lips give understanding and wisdom and are able as a result to rule whereas the fool has to be driven along by others. Having no sense within him, he has to be beaten by another party to make him do anything worthwhile.

In verse 15, both the rich man and the poor man are described in a way that suggests that they are in a precarious position. The poor man is vulnerable on account of his

poverty, quite naturally. But the rich man, however, has a different sort of vulnerability.

Understanding verse 15 will be easier when we see the parallel in Proverbs chapter 18 verse 11. A rich man's wealth is his strong city and like a high wall in his imagination. The second part of that gives us the clue.

In verse 15, his strong city describes how the wealth is perceived by the rich man. He thinks that it gives him security whereas as we have seen in some of the surrounding Proverbs, ill-gotten or foolish wealth is no such source of security at all. The great evidence of wisdom in many parts of Scripture is mastery of the tongue and the words of a person reveal the state of their heart and whether they are wise or foolish.

The slanderer and the prattler are the subject of verses 18 and 19. The slanderer conceals his hatred while backbiting and spreading rumours. The prattler, meanwhile, is unable to restrain his lips.

By contrast, the prudent person knows when it is time to speak and when it is time to be silent. He knows the right words to give in season. The preciousness of the words of the righteous is the subject of verses 20 and 21.

Here again there is a contrast between the mouth and the heart, although this time it is the mouth of the righteous being contrasted with the heart of the wicked. The heart of the wicked is of little value. It has not been formed.

It is not a site of meditation. The heart of the wicked is more like a garbage tip whereas the righteous guards and tends his heart like a garden. With such a well-guarded and formed heart, the words of the righteous are precious.

In chapter 25, verses 11 and 12, such words are described. A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprover to a listening ear.

Unsurprisingly, the words of such wise people will be treasured by others who are on the path of wisdom. In verse 11, the mouth of the righteous was compared to a life-giving fountain. Here the lips of the righteous are a source of food.

In the previous chapter, wisdom was compared to a banquet. And here the pronouncements of the wise are described as food from which others draw sustenance. Fools, by contrast, die for lack of sense.

They can't even eat the food that is before them. They can't accept the words of wisdom. As a result, they suffer the doom associated with their folly.

From verse 22, we have a contrast between the fate of the righteous and the wise and the foolish and the wicked. This contrast is drawn both in the immediate situation and in

the longer-term future. The ultimate source of true riches is the blessing of the Lord.

As a blessing, it is pure and unmixed. Both the fool and the wise are in search of pleasure. However, the fool takes pleasure in a sinful levity.

He takes nothing seriously, least of all his sin. By contrast, the wise person recognizes the joy and the delight and the exuberance of true wisdom. There is a deep delight to be found in the search for knowledge, to be enjoyed in skillful and effective labor in the world, and in walking in the way and enjoying the fruits of the path of righteousness.

The wicked experiences a dread. He recognizes that his actions are associated with consequences. He hopes and maybe fancies to himself that he will escape these consequences.

But deep within, he suffers this dread. He knows that he is due justice. He is always afraid that it will catch up with him.

Verse 24 assures us that one day it will. By contrast, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who seek the kingdom of God, those whose desire is set upon those things that are good and wise, they will also receive what they are anticipating, not the apprehension of those that are fearing judgment upon their sins, but the godly longings of the righteous heart. It may look as if the wicked are prospering, but the true reality will be revealed when the foundations are tested in the time of trial.

At that point, the wicked will be wiped away. The righteous, however, will stand and be established forever. This looks towards not just the immediate temporal horizon of continuing history, but the great end of things when destinies are finally settled.

This theme continues in verses 27 and 28. In verse 29, we are told that the way of the Lord is a stronghold to the blameless, but destruction to evildoers. The way of the Lord is his moral government of the world.

The way that he establishes righteousness. The righteous walk in the way of the Lord. They are walking in line with, with the grain of, this moral governance.

By contrast, this same moral government is something that crushes and destroys the evildoers. The contrasting fate of the righteous and the wicked is also the subject of verse 30, which might remind us of Psalm 37 verses 9 to 13. The evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

In just a little while, the wicked shall be no more. Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him. But the Lord laughs

at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming. The same establishment of the righteous within the land is also related to the establishment of their speech.

As the mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, what is within their hearts, they will be established. Meanwhile, the perverse tongue will be cut off from the land, just as the wicked are cut off. Their speech, their lies, will be silenced.

The speech of the righteous and the speech of the wicked reveal what they have a deep acquaintance with in their heart. The lips of the righteous reveal their knowledge of what is acceptable, and the mouth of the wicked the perversity that they harbour within. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which the mouth of the righteous could be considered a fountain of life? Proverbs chapter 11 continues the collection of the Proverbs of Solomon. A balance would be scales used for measuring weights. These could be tampered with in various ways to produce a false impression in favour of the owner.

The weights were used on the balance against the items being sold. Unjust merchants could use weights that were lighter than they ought to be to tilt sales in their favour, and weights that were heavier to advantage them in their purchases. They might keep both in their bags, bringing out the larger or the smaller weight, depending upon whether they were selling or buying.

Proverbs is here repeating principles that are presented elsewhere in the Torah. Leviticus chapter 19 verses 35 to 36, for instance. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hymn.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And again in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 13 to 16. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God.

In Deuteronomy the prohibition of the unjust weight appears among material mostly devoted to the tenth commandment against coveting. One might also class this under the eighth against stealing, or the ninth against false witness. Proverbs underlines the claim of Deuteronomy chapter 25 verse 16, that righteous practice in such matters should find motivation in desire for the Lord's favor.

The Lord upholds the moral order, and in many matters that cannot effectively be policed, a just society depends upon a population that fears the Lord and desires His favor. A consistent use of just weights will raise people's trust of trustworthy individuals, but it will also raise the general trust levels in society as a whole. By contrast, a society where people routinely defraud others will be greatly limited by its low level of social trust.

An exaggerated opinion of oneself and presumption in one's action invites the corrective

blows of bitter experience. The proud man is unwilling to receive the correction offered by the wise rebuke, nor is he attentive to the teaching of the understanding more generally. Consequently, he must learn the hard way by eating the bitter fruit of his folly.

The downfall of the proud can come about by many different means. By contrast, the humble, humility being a virtue closely associated with the fear of the Lord, are not exalted in their own eyes. They will treat others around them accordingly, they will put them before themselves, and win favor with many as a result.

Humility also produces teachability. They will receive the law of the Lord, and also learn wisdom. Verses 3-8 contrast the ways of the righteous and the wicked.

The way of the Lord is the way of integrity, and the upright commit themselves to this way, even when they can't understand why it is leading them on the path that it is. Here we see the importance of trusting in the moral government and providence of the Lord, and obeying his commandments accordingly, even when it doesn't seem to be beneficial. We often think about the righteous holding their own integrity, but here we see that the integrity of the righteous, as it is a commitment to the way of the Lord and his moral government, is something that preserves and guides them.

By contrast, the treacherous are brought to ruin by the very dynamics of the path that they have committed themselves to. A similar truth is expressed in verse 4. Verse 4 is closely related to chapter 10 verse 2, Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. Implicitly then, the riches at the beginning here are the unrighteous mammon that people can build up and trust in.

However, despite the fact that riches seem promising, what will truly deliver someone is righteousness. When trials and days of testing come, it will be integrity that guards people. All of this requires a certain walking by faith.

In the immediacy of a situation it can often seem pragmatic to compromise, to take the way of wickedness instead of the way of righteousness, to adopt just a little crookedness, to emulate successful sinners around you. However, these verses make plain that those who adopt such paths will come to ruin. The wicked person trusts in their own providence, their own ability to govern their world.

And yet the righteous recognises that they are not in control, and in situations where it would seem that they are definitely on the losing side, they still trust in the Lord, and in the end they are rewarded for that trust. The wicked's wealth will come to nothing, but the righteous will be delivered by the Lord. In the end, their integrity will also advantage them over the way of the wicked.

The wicked will be caught in their own schemes. The mouth of the guardless man is a source of violence. We might think of Paul's description of the mouth of the wicked in

Romans chapter 3, verses 13-14.

Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips, their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. This verse is similar to the one that precedes it in verse 8. The guardless man is a troublemaker from which the righteous need to be delivered.

However, the righteous will be delivered through wisdom, and the troublemakers will be caught up in their own trouble. Verse 9 functions as a transition between verses 3-8, which speak about the contrasting destinies of the righteous and the wicked, and the way in which their characteristic behaviours set them on the path towards their divergent destinies, and the verses that follow in verses 10-15, which concern the fate of the community that is influenced by the righteous and the wicked in different ways. Here the concern for the community is seen in the city, the neighbour, and the people more generally.

Cities are built up when they have righteous people in their midst. We might think here about the way that righteous people protect the city from judgement. As in the case of Sodom, if there were ten righteous people, the whole city would have been saved on their account.

The righteous are also concerned to do good to their neighbours, to build up the city around them. Not only will they protect the city against the Lord's judgement, they will establish industry within the city, they will build up the walls of the city to defend it against its enemies, they will enact justice within the city, and punish the evildoer, they will show kindness to the poor and the destitute. In all of these ways they build up everyone else around them.

By contrast, the wicked are a great threat to the well-being of the city. Their trouble-making speech, their lies, their slander, their rumours, their backbiting, and their incitement to violence all threaten the life and the peace of the city. They spread discord and hatred.

Consequently, when they perish, the city rejoices. It has been delivered from a threat. Verses 12-13 describe a particularly dangerous form of speech, bearing false witness against one's neighbour in the spreading of slander and the revealing of secrets.

Those who do this are foolish and untrustworthy. But those with prudence and understanding can hold their tongues. They recognise the great damage that careless words can do.

A word rashly spoken cannot easily be taken back. Similar rashness and judgement can be seen in verse 15, in the person who puts up security for a stranger, putting himself in a position of considerable jeopardy. A recurring theme in the Book of Proverbs is finding

guidance and counsel, and where one should look to discover it.

If you are simple, not yet having wisdom, how do you know where to look for actual wisdom? Here the situation of a people without wise counsellors and a people with an abundance of wise advisers are compared and contrasted. The discovery of wisdom requires guidance. However, when there are many guides saying different things, you need to know how to discern between them.

And one of the ways you do this is by having a multitude of counsellors who all give their different perspectives and can be weighed against each other. A person with an abundance of counsellors can take the strengths of various different positions and synthesise them into their own. Weaknesses of one person's position can be revealed by the stress-testing of another.

Verse 16 is a complicated one to interpret. It might be something closer to synonymous parallelism. Michael Fox argues that the word translated violent in many translations would better be translated as diligent.

That word is also given a more positive sense in the Septuagint, where the translation refers to virtuous men. Alternatively, it might contrast the gracious woman who gets honour and the violent men who get riches, but nothing more than riches. And as we will see in places like verse 13, even that gain will prove to be deceptive and short-lived.

The wicked often seems to get his rewards very quickly and easily, whereas the righteous may have to sow for quite some period of time before they reap their harvest. Nevertheless, the reward of the righteous is sure, but the riches of the wicked can soon vanish. Assurance of the certainty of the contrasting fates of the righteous and the wicked, of the fool and the wise, are also given to us in verses 19 and 21.

And while the wicked man might think that he is advantaging himself when he is cruel to others, and that the man who is kind and generous is being a fool, in the end the kindness of the kind man rebounds to himself, whereas the cruelty of the cruel man hurts himself. Verse 16 spoke of the gracious woman, and in verse 22 we have a contrasting woman, a woman who has beauty but no discretion. The most common way to read this proverb is to think of the woman as like the pig who wears her beauty like a gold ring.

Her attractive appearance is completely out of keeping with her inner character. Fox suggests an alternative reading, one directed far more immediately to the young man who is choosing a wife. He observes how the elements line up within the simile.

The ring is like the woman. The fact that the ring is gold connects with her beauty. The lack of discretion corresponds with placing this ring in the snout of a pig.

So what then is the pig? The pig, Fox argues, is the man who chooses such a woman for

his wife. In such a situation the beauty of the ring is degraded, and the pig only looks more ridiculous. As Proverbs 31 verse 30 says, Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

Such a woman is the wife that the wise man will seek. Verses 23 to 27 continue to contrast the faiths of the righteous and the wicked, but here focus mostly upon their generosity and charity. Verse 23 is parallel to chapter 10 verse 28, The hope of the righteous brings joy, but the expectation of the wicked will perish.

Here, however, the goodness of the desire of the righteous is accented. The righteous man, by giving away, ends up gaining more for himself. In giving freely he becomes richer.

By blessing he is enriched. By watering others he himself is watered. By selling freely rather than hoarding he himself has prospered.

The wise and righteous man will not be niggardly in his dealings. He will be generous and charitable and not withholding. Like a farmer scattering his grain abroad, he will joyfully give, and when the time comes he will receive a bountiful harvest from the Lord.

As in verse 4 in verse 28, we see that riches are not something ultimately to trust in. They will fail those who rely upon them. The righteous person is compared by contrast to a green leaf, and then in verse 30 his fruit is compared to a tree of life.

We might here recall the description of the righteous person in Psalm 1, who meditates upon the law of God and is like a tree planted by streams of water. A similar verse to verse 30 that helps us to interpret it is found in Proverbs 13, verse 14. The second half of verse 30, whoever captures souls is wise, obviously has a positive meaning, although if we saw the words captures souls in isolation we would presume that it had a negative meaning.

Reading it in light of Proverbs 13, verse 14, we can see that the one who captures souls is one who is delivering souls, redeeming them from a point of peril. Once again the righteous person is someone who spreads life and goodness around them. Other people benefit from having righteous people in their communities.

Fools by contrast are troublemakers that bring conflict to their communities, and can also bring ruin to their households and their dependents. Their property will end up in the hands of the wise, and they will become servants to the wise. The final verse of the chapter is an a fortiori argument from the way that the righteous will be repaid on the earth, which might either refer to the way that judgment begins with the house of God, that the righteous are the first to receive punishment for their sins, or a reference to the way that God rewards the righteous with blessing, whichever of those two meanings is in view here.

The punishment of the wicked and the sinner is far more urgent. If the righteous will be rewarded, how much more will they? A question to consider, what are some of the dynamics by which someone who gives freely will grow richer than the person who is withholding? Proverbs chapter 12 continues the second section of the book of Proverbs, and the main collection of the Proverbs of Solomon. It opens in verses 1 to 3 with some fundamental truths about wisdom, and the action-consequence nexus.

The first concerns the relationship between wisdom and the reception of discipline. The fool in his pride will not accept correction, whereas the wise person loves discipline, he's humble enough to receive it, and he knows that the correction received from the wise will deepen his grasp upon knowledge. He isn't just willing to receive discipline, he loves it.

Presumably this will lead him to pursue proper discipline. He will want correction when he goes astray, he will open himself up to being rebuked. He will invite people to speak harder words to him.

He will do whatever is in his power to lower people's sense of trepidation in saying something that might offend him. He is not offended by correction, he delights in it. He regards those who give such correction to him as his true friends.

He will keep them close by, he will gather honest counsellors around him, and he will be very vigilant against the flatterer. In these and many other ways, the person who loves discipline is at a great advantage over the person who will just grudgingly receive it. Verse 2 reminds us once again of the Lord's moral government over the affairs of man.

Ultimately, beyond the natural consequences of people's actions, we should see the way that the Lord's hand is at work in bringing the consequences of people's sin upon their head and rewarding the righteous. Verse 3 continues to explore the consequence of wickedness. Wickedness may look to prosper.

It grows up and flourishes for a period of time, but there is no root, and when the time of testing comes, it does not remain. However, the righteous are firmly grounded, and as a result, they will remain. Our actions and character reflect upon and affect other people, and theirs reflect upon and affect us.

The righteous and wise son is a glory to his parents. Likewise, the excellent wife is the crown of her husband. This point is taken up in Proverbs 31.

In verse 10 of that chapter, an excellent wife, who can find, she is more precious than jewels. And in verse 23, her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. The wise wife here is described as the greatest source of her husband's honour and standing.

Her excellence equips her husband to exercise rule and enjoy social standing within his

community. People often talk about the biblical teaching concerning the headship of the man, as if it were primarily internally focused within the life of the married couple. However, in scripture, the headship of the man is primarily directed out into the society more generally.

And here we see that it is not a headship in which the man is alone. Rather, his capacity to exercise headship is profoundly dependent upon his wife. The wife is the glory of her husband, and a wise wife can build up her husband within the community, and both of them prosper together.

Rather than primarily thinking of the headship of the man being over the woman, we should think a lot more about the way that the woman is the one who crowns the headship of her husband. Without such a wise wife, a man is robbed of his greatest counsellor. He is robbed of his glory, of the one who gives him standing and honour within the community.

There are few things more debilitating, as the second half of this verse makes clear, than a wife who brings shame. She compromises her husband's standing in the community. She is rottenness in his bones, greatly weakening him, and causing him significant pain.

Verses 5-7 consist of contrasts between the righteous and the wicked. It moves from their thoughts and counsels, to their words and mouth, to their station and house. From deceitful counsels we get to lying in wait for blood, to persons that are overthrown.

And on the other side we have just thoughts, leading to the protection of upright mouths, to a house that will stand and endure in the time of testing. In verse 8 we see that people's social standing depends upon their known character, whether they are foolish or wise. The theme of social standing continues in the next verse, where those who are inordinately concerned with social appearances are seen to be foolish.

It is far better to prosper within one's means, than to put on a great display of wealth that one does not actually possess. There are forms of behaviour that can reveal the character of a person. How a man treats those who are providing him with service, or those who are under his authority, can be very revealing.

Perhaps also how a man treats children, who cannot offer him any great honour in return for his attention. Here Solomon focuses upon the way that a man treats his beast. The law of the Sabbath commands Israelites to give rest to their ox and donkey.

Elsewhere they are commanded to show compassion for an animal in distress. The righteousness of a person then is revealed in the small mercies that they show to the people and animals around them. By contrast, the wicked lacks mercy.

Even what the wicked might imagine to be merciful, turns out to be cruel. As an example, we might think of the way that in some supposedly morally advanced societies,

children with Down's Syndrome will be aborted, rather than being allowed to be born. It is presumed to be a kindness to rob such a person of their life, and to deny that their existence has the dignity to justify it.

Some people are always in search of a get-rich-quick program, some way to find a shortcut to the gaining of wealth. However, the person who diligently works their land, and does not try and take the shortcut, will find that they have plenty of bread, while the person who is always looking around for such schemes, will come to nothing. The interpretation of verse 12 is a difficult one.

The word rendered spoilt could also be rendered as net, or snare, or maybe stronghold. Roosevelt argues for the final rendering, suggesting that the meaning is that the wicked desires the fortification that is enjoyed by evildoers. They want this external defence.

However, the righteous has firm roots, and that will be their defence. There is an intrinsic defence in righteousness, that the wicked does not have in their wickedness. Something of the intrinsic reward, defence, and security of righteousness is seen in verses 13 and 14.

The evil man's lips are his worst enemies. The evil man can tell lies and get caught out by them. The evil man can incite violence with his lips, and it can boomerang back to him.

The rash or impetuous words of an evil man can also catch him out. However, the righteous man escapes from trouble, and while the words of the evil man typically turn upon him in the time of trouble, the words of the righteous man are his greatest defence. Indeed, from his righteous speech, the righteous man is blessed.

It is like a tree that bears fruit, and then he gets to eat that fruit. What a man sows, he will later reap. The work of a man's hand comes back to him.

The second half of the chapter begins with another proverb concerning formation, that might remind us of the proverb with which the whole chapter began. Once again, it concerns the contrast between the wise man and the fool's attitude towards advice and counsel. The fool is inured against teaching.

He cannot receive it. He is right in his own eyes, so he will seek out the flatterer. He won't hear contrary advice.

He will instinctively gravitate towards people who confirm him in his existing way. Verses 16 to 23 are concerned with sins of speech. They are stitched together by the alternation between negative followed by positive versets, and positive followed by negative versets.

One of the hallmarks of a fool is his inability to control his spirit. He gives immediate vent

to his temper, and cannot master it. You will always know when a fool is angry.

By contrast, the wise and prudent man is the master of his spirit. He is able to ignore an insult. He is not bound up in a reactive relationship with other people.

By responding peacefully to provocation, he is able to de-escalate situations. He gives people the opportunity to climb down. How many times in an argument do people utter rash words that they wish they could take back, but because the person with whom they are speaking cannot master their spirit and ignore an insult, they are pressed to double down on words that they would gladly retract? The person who can ignore an insult in this manner is the master of the situation.

He is not determined by the anger of others, or by the heat and tension of situations. The connection between character and action is one that is often underlined in the Book of Proverbs. Here we see that the person who speaks the truth gives honest evidence, and a false witness utters deceit.

If you perceive people's actions, you will have a sense of their character, and likewise if you have a sense of their character, you will have a sense of their characteristic actions. In situations of uncertainty and in clarity, this gives us a principle by which we can judge how much to rely upon the words of people. While it may seem banal or tautological, it is an important principle to grasp.

The liar, for instance, will lie even when he doesn't have to. It is characteristic to him. When you have no way of immediately ascertaining the truth of a person's statement, you can nonetheless judge by their characteristic actions whether they are to be relied upon.

The person who speaks the truth is discerned in a similar manner. If someone tells the truth even when they don't have to, or even to their own harm, we have good reason to rely upon them when things are otherwise uncertain. In verse 19 we see that the truthful lips endure, whereas lying tongues are soon silenced.

Perhaps we could see this as being silenced in judgment, or maybe they are silenced by being confounded or condemned. While this is primarily a promise of blessing to the righteous and judgment upon the wicked, it also serves to illustrate the principle of time, the way that time reveals the character of people. The words of fools and liars rapidly depreciate in value, whereas the words of the wise will greatly appreciate in people's estimation over time.

By the same principle, we should be wary of giving too much weight to novel words, and should pay far more attention to words whose wisdom has been tested by time. When people are always chasing the latest fad, they will be very susceptible to being led astray by lying tongues. When reading the Proverbs, it is important to pay attention to their

form, and what it reveals about their meaning.

For instance, the antithetical parallelism of verse 20 suggests a contrast between the deceit that is in the heart of the wicked, and the joy known by those who plan peace. The implication is that the deceit with which the wicked are preoccupied is something that brings no joy at all. It is a miserable obsession that brings them only bitterness.

The righteous are protected against evil. Whatever happens to them, the Lord ultimately shepherds them towards their good. All things work together for good to those who love God to the called according to His purpose.

No such protection is enjoyed by the wicked. They are filled with trouble, they make trouble, and trouble will come back upon their own heads. Once again in verse 22, we are reminded of the moral government of the Lord.

Lying lips are an abomination to Him, but those who act faithfully are His delight. Seeking the praise of the Lord, and trusting in His moral government, it is not foolish to pursue an honest path. Verse 23 forms a bracket with verse 16.

Verse 16 begins with a fool who cannot help but reveal his internal state, and then describes the prudent who is able to cover it up. Verse 23 reverses that order. The heart of fools proclaims folly.

The fool cannot constrain his lips. He gives full utterance to his character. If you spend any time with a fool, he will want to tell you about his folly.

He cannot help but broadcast it. Not appreciating just how shameful his folly is, he cannot easily help but reveal its presence to those around him. If you really want to discover if someone is a fool, just listen to them, give them time to speak.

They will soon declare themselves. Verses 24-27 are bracketed by statements about the diligent and the slothful. Just as the words of the truthful appreciate in value, so the hand of the diligent will make him rich over time, while the slothful will come to nothing, and be reduced to forced labour.

In verse 27 we see that the slothful man will not even begin the task of pursuing gain, perhaps, or will not bring it to its proper completion. He will waste the resources that he has to hand. The power of words is an important theme in the Book of Proverbs.

In verse 18 we see the power of rash words to cause damage, and the power of wise words to bring healing. The careless sword thrusts of rash words are easily applied, but words of healing reveal wisdom. In verse 25 we see something similar.

The power of a good word, fitly spoken in season, to revive the troubled or anxious spirit. Righteousness and wickedness are contagious. They provide patterns for others to

emulate.

In verse 26 we see this. The person who is righteous is not just righteous for himself, he serves as a pattern and exemplar for others. When people see the righteous they are spurred to righteousness.

Verse 28 sums things up in describing the path of righteousness. It is a path of pure life, whereas we see earlier in the Book of Proverbs. It is a path of rising light.

A question to consider. Proverbs chapter 12 is concerned at many points with the way that people's words and actions, even ones that might seem otherwise insignificant, reveal their characters. If we want to discern people's character, what are some of the key things in the immediate situation, in the medium term, and in the long term, that will help us to discern what type of persons they are? Proverbs chapter 13 begins with another proverb concerning instruction.

Translating it more directly, it says, A wise son of father's instruction. The second verset about the scoffer's failure to heed rebuke implies that the wise son hears the father's instruction. However, Michael Fox suggests that we should read this verse as stroboscopic.

J.B. Williams defines this term as a juxtaposition of images which are seen quickly side by side, then they are shut off. The point would be that a wise son implies a father's instruction. If you see a wise son, you are seeing the consequence of the discipline of a wise and a good father.

The second half of the verse suggests that the converse implication cannot be so readily drawn. A foolish son is not necessarily the evidence of a lack of a father's instruction, although he commonly will be. Rather, there are scornful sons who refuse to receive the discipline and rebukes of those over them.

There's an inexact contrast between the fruit of a man's mouth and the appetite of the treacherous in verse 2, suggesting that the wise man produces life-sustaining conditions by his wise speech, whereas the treacherous has an appetite for violence and produces nothing that sustains himself as a result. Once again, we need to recognise the way in which the meaning of proverbs is not all on the surface. It requires closer attention and reflection.

By inexact juxtapositions, for instance, they can imply things without saying them directly. We should also always be trying to discern the way in which the proverbs are true. They don't provide their own context, and spoken in the wrong context, they might even be foolish.

The hearer is required to discern contexts and ways in which a proverb might be true, discovering when it should be used and when it should not. In the Book of Job, for

instance, we have several examples of ways in which poorly applied truth can function as error. There are a few proverbs that make a similar point.

The mouth is like a gate to be guarded. We should have circumspection in our speech. James 3, verses 5-10 speaks about the danger of the uncontrolled tongue or mouth.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who were made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

A similar point is made in Proverbs 21, verse 23. Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue, keeps himself out of trouble. Verse 4 contrasts the craving of the soul of the sluggard, who gets nothing in reward for his craving, and the soul of the diligent, that is not defined by craving, but is nonetheless richly supplied.

As he works hard, he finds more than enough for his needs. Verses 5 and 6 present two contrasts between the righteous and the wicked. The righteous hating falsehood, and righteousness guarding the one whose way is blameless.

We've seen the same point elsewhere in the book of Proverbs. Righteousness is something that protects people. Their integrity is something that upholds and guards them.

On the other hand, the wicked, by the very sinful paths that they have chosen for themselves, invite ruin. Themes of wealth come to the foreground in verses 7 to 11. Verse 7 is a complicated one to understand.

Bruce Waltke gives a number of different possibilities. It could refer to the person who considers himself rich, but isn't. The one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God, like the rich fool of Luke chapter 12.

Or it could refer to people who are blind to what they have or do not have. Or maybe the focus is on pretense. We can think about this in the context of Proverbs chapter 12 verse 9. Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and lack bread.

Verse 8 is another complicated verse to understand. There's an inexact opposition in the

antithetical parallelism of the verse. The ransom of man's life does not match he has no threat.

The rich man has the resources to buy his way out of trouble that he has gotten himself into. The second half of the verse is not so clear. Waltke suggests that since the poor man cannot pay up, he has no motivation to listen to moral rebuke.

The rich man's standing and possessions means that he has something to lose, which make him more receptive to moral correction. The rich and famous, for instance, may publicly confess their faults when they are called out because their wealth is put in jeopardy. Fox argues that this is not very persuasive.

It is far too convoluted an explanation. William McCain argues that it means that the poor man, who lacks the supposed security of wealth, may find that people have less leverage on him. He has nothing to lose, so he cannot be threatened in the same way.

The difference between the wealth of the righteous and the wealth of the wicked is expressed in verse 9 with the light of one and the lamp of the other. The lamp of the wicked may seem to burn very brightly for a time, but it is short-lasting, whereas the true wealth of the righteous will endure. A common theme in the Book of Proverbs is the substance and character and source of people's wealth.

We may focus simply upon the appearance, but that leaves many of the most important factors unexamined. Easy money, wealth obtained through wrongdoing, wealth that is not backed up by diligence, and other sorts of perverse wealth are short-lasting and provide no long-term security. At other points, it is the nature of the wealth that is contrasted.

A rich person may have vast sums in the bank, but may have a life that is miserable and full of care, whereas a righteous person, who has invested in the life of their household, may enjoy great prosperity of a kind, albeit with little money to his name. Many of the things that are most valuable are not things that appear on a bank balance. Insolence and refusal to take advice produce strife.

Arrogant and unteachable fools produce violent and unsettled communities. Waltke expresses the principle from a different perspective. Where there is strife, there is pride.

By implication, one of the hallmarks of the wise, who take advice, is peace. Once again, the source and the character of wealth is the subject of verse 11. Wealth that is gained as easy money will soon dwindle.

The person who gets a great windfall in the lottery can easily squander it. The foolish lottery winner can squander what they have, because they do not have the principles by which such wealth is truly gained. Meanwhile, the person who gathers little by little has the fundamental principle by which wealth is generated.

Within our society, we can often focus narrowly upon the way that money is divided, or the way that power is divided, and not pay enough attention to the different ways that these things are generated in the first place. A society that is built upon gambling and speculation may enjoy great wealth, but it will not actually be secure wealth, whereas those who gather little by little and build up in a responsible way have wealth that will be more enduring. The theme of desire fulfilled connects verses 12 and 19, and brackets the material between them, which mostly concerns desires and what comes to pass for the foolish and the wise.

The sapping of morale is one of the results of frustrated hopes, but the experience of the realization of one's hopes revives and gives new life. Verse 13 speaks of the despising or revering of the commandment, and the consequences that these postures bring upon oneself. The person who reveres the word of God and who honors the teaching of the wise, which is the subject of the next verse, will prosper, whereas those who despise it will come to ruin.

In verse 14, the teaching of the wise is described as a fountain of life. It grants those who attend to it the fullness of life and its blessings. In verse 15, we see that good judgment wins favor with God and man.

People pay attention and give honor to the wise, and more so as time goes on, and as they see that their words have not fallen to the ground, their words grow in weight over time and in value. The antithesis here, however, is treachery, which is likely not what we would presume to be the antithesis. When reading Proverbs, John Higgins has helpfully suggested covering up the second verset while reading the first, and then guessing what the antithesis, or the synonymous or synthetic parallel, would be.

Then we should look at what the actual statement is, and then reflect upon the difference between what we expected and what is actually the case. Here the surprise of the antithesis invites us to reflect upon how treachery and disloyalty may be the opposite of the good judgment that wins favor, or, alternatively, on how prudence is loyal. The next verse shows how the shrewd man acts circumspectly, whereas the fool flaunts his folly.

Whereas the wise man carefully deliberates about his action, the fool cannot help but display his character in all that he does. The treacherous or unreliable messenger is the subject of verse 17. Ultimately, such a messenger comes to ruin.

He betrays those that he is supposed to be acting for, but a faithful ambassador brings healing. The consequences of ignoring instruction are poverty and disgrace, but honor is enjoyed by those who heed. The desire fulfilled was compared to the tree of life in verse 12, and now, in verse 19, it is spoken of as sweet to the soul.

But now there's a surprising parallel. To turn away from evil is an abomination to fools.

The only immediate point of contrast here seems to be between sweetness and abomination.

But this invites us to unpack, and to consider what might be implied. The fulfillment of desire is sweet, but such a gratification comes only to those who abhor evil. The fool cannot allow himself to turn away from his evil, so he will be doomed to experience the frustration and the sickness of deferred hope.

Verse 20 moves to the subject of companionship. Who are your companions? Those people that you keep company with will shape your character. Those who walk with the wise take on their character.

Likewise, those who associate with fools. You can tell a lot about people by their friends and the company that they keep. You can tell something, as you see in this verse, about their destiny.

You will also have an indication of their character and their values. The book of Psalms begins with this concern to avoid evil company. Psalm 1, verse 1. 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 33 makes a similar point.

Bad company ruins good morals. Verses 21 and 22 should be read as a pairing. The first begins with sinners, and then goes on to the good, and then the next begins with good, and goes on to sinners.

As such, they are a miniature chiasmic pair. They explore the contrasting fates that belong to these two groups. Disaster is like a homing missile on its way towards the sinner.

He is doomed. It's only a matter of time. In verse 22, the emphasis moves to the question of inheritance or no inheritance, the good that the righteous person establishes can endure.

We may think about the way that the Lord promises blessings to thousands of generations to those who love him. On the other hand, there are principles that countervail this within the wisdom literature. We might think about the book of Ecclesiastes, which speaks about the futility of the person who lays up wealth and builds a legacy, only for it to be carelessly squandered by a fool that comes after him.

Proverbs push against each other and are often qualified by each other. One of the marks of the wise is knowing the extent to which and the context within which a statement is true. Injustice is a powerful force that can frustrate the poor.

In verse 23, wicked oppressors are one complication of the deed-consequence nexus of Proverbs. The ground, or the poor themselves, are swept away by injustice, and so the diligence of the poor may be denied its just reward. The English proverb, spare the rod,

spoil the child, is expressed more sharply in verse 24.

The one who spares the rod hates his son. The mercy of the wicked is cruel, as we see in chapter 12, verse 10. Wicked parents may think that they are being kind to their children in not disciplining them.

However, theirs is an act of great cruelty. Jordan Peterson has written about these dynamics in his book, *Twelve Rules for Life*. He writes, and leave them without guidance.

He continues later, Further not, modern parents are simply paralyzed by the fear that they will no longer be liked, or even loved by their children if they chastise them for any reason. They want their children's friendship above all, and are willing to sacrifice respect to get it. This is not good.

A child will have many friends, but only two parents, if that. And parents are more, not less, than friends. Friends have very limited authority to correct.

Every parent, therefore, needs to learn to tolerate the momentary anger, or even hatred directed towards them by their children, after necessary corrective action has been taken, as the capacity of children to perceive or care about long-term consequences is very limited. Parents are the arbiters of society. They teach children how to behave, so that other people will be able to interact meaningfully and productively with them.

It is an act of responsibility to discipline a child. It is not anger at misbehaviour. It is not revenge for a misdeed.

It is instead a careful combination of mercy and long-term judgement. Proper discipline requires effort, indeed is virtually synonymous with effort. It is difficult to pay careful attention to children.

It is difficult to figure out what is wrong, and what is right, and why. It is difficult to formulate just and compassionate strategies of discipline, and to negotiate the application with others deeply involved in a child's care. Because of this combination of responsibility and difficulty, any suggestion that all constraints placed on children are damaging can be perversely welcome.

The primary form of discipline in the Book of Proverbs is not punishment. It is loving instruction, guidance, and giving an example. Those who depend narrowly upon punishment are misguided, but so are those who think it kindness not to discipline.

Hebrews 12, verses 5-11 describes the discipline of the Lord. Then you are illegitimate children, and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them.

Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined

us for a short time, as it seemed best to them. But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.

But later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. The rod stands for discipline more generally, not spanking more narrowly. There are many forms of discipline that fall under this theme here.

Nor should this be focused just upon the young child. The rod here may be related to the punishment that would be inflicted upon the severest actions of the older child. The rod then would represent the furthest extent that punishment can take, as in the case of the man's blood being shed, who has shed man's blood, in Genesis chapter 9. The consequences of poor parental discipline are seen everywhere within our society.

Many of the social dysfunctions that we experience are either the consequence of a lack of discipline, of our children, or the bitter harvest of seeds of poor discipline that was applied earlier on. Proud, entitled, selfish people, who believe that the world should revolve around them, and that no one should cross their will, have generally been made that way by a certain sort of upbringing. This gets at another sense of the meaning of this verse.

Whoever spares the rod hates his son. He comes to loathe the son that his upbringing has produced, whereas the son who has been raised faithfully by his father enjoys a good relationship with that father, because the son that has experienced discipline becomes a likeable person. One of the tests of good discipline is whether it produces this lasting love between parent and child.

Many children have experienced cruelty and violence from their parents, which masquerades as discipline, but is really anger and vengefulness. The parent wants to break or suppress the child's will. They terrorise their child because they believe that their will should have dominance.

Many modern forms of parenting are a reaction against cruel forms of parenting that prevailed in the past. However, parents who cuddle and spoil their kids, and parents who psychologically manipulate and condition their kids just to make them compliant with them, are also expressing a sort of hatred towards them, rather than actually instructing them. The loving father will be diligent to discipline his son.

He will not allow a sort of false empathy for his son to prevent him from exercising such discipline. True discipline is a result of compassion and love. Even though it hurts the child, it does the opposite of harming them.

The child may not like it, but it will be for their long-term good. This is a test of true love in the Book of Proverbs. As Proverbs 27, verse 6 puts it, Faithful are the wounds of a

friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

This principle very strongly applies to parenting. The chapter ends by returning to the theme of desire and appetite, something that it has discussed at various points. The righteous find that his appetites and his desires are met, whereas the wicked are frustrated.

A question to consider. In verse 15 we read, Good sense wins favour, but the way of the treacherous is their ruin. Why is treachery the antithesis of good sense? Proverbs chapter 14 begins with a proverb that might remind us of Proverbs chapter 9, verse 1. Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.

We should remember that the Book of Proverbs is largely written to the young son. The choice of wisdom is seen in the choice of the right woman. This is particularly seen at the very end of the Book of Proverbs, in Proverbs chapter 31, verses 10-31.

The house of the woman is her household and her standing within the community. The foolish woman is the opposite of such a wise woman. She will bring to ruin everything that is left in her charge.

The wrong woman will be the ruin of her husband, but the right woman will be his glory. You can discern people's fear of the Lord by their integrity or their lack thereof. This is the claim that is made in verse 2. In many ways it's an application of a principle that our Lord teaches us.

By their fruit you will know them. If you see someone walking in uprightness, you know something about their character. They are someone who fear the Lord.

Someone who is devious and deceptive, you know something about who they are within. They despise the Lord. The fool's careless words in verse 3 come back to haunt him.

Not having guarded his lips, his rash vows, his inciting words, his lies, or whatever he speaks that is false and foolish, comes back and ends up causing him trouble. The wise man, by contrast, is greatly strengthened by his speech. He speaks wisely and prudently and so as a result his words empower him.

There is no manger to clean when there are no oxen, but nor will there be abundant crops. Verse 4 makes the point that out of unwillingness to undertake the unpleasant task of cleaning the manger, a man cuts himself off from a great source of wealth. The fool and the sluggard's desire for easy money is related to this.

They don't want to undertake responsibility and unpleasant tasks and so they're always looking for the quick fix, the quick way to get rich. The diligent and the responsible and the wise, however, know that taking up responsibility and challenge and difficulty brings true and lasting wealth. How is a judge to discern the character of a witness? Mostly

through consistency of character.

Lying is like breathing to the false witness. He breathes out lies. He can't help but speak lies.

Even when he does not need to speak lies, he will speak them nonetheless. It's become second nature to him. The faithful witness, by contrast, will consistently speak the truth even when it is difficult, unpopular or might cause him some severe disadvantage.

A common theme in the Book of Proverbs is that one's posture of heart is determinative for whether one will receive wisdom or not. The person who is a fool or a scoffer is inured to wisdom. Even if he wanted to find wisdom, he will not be able to find it.

His heart is not apt for the receiving of wisdom. Verse 7 warns people to move away from the presence of fools. If you encounter fools who are settled in a particular context, you have a good indication that you are not in a place where you are likely to encounter wisdom.

By their fruits you will know them. This applies to contexts as well as to persons. If, for instance, you want to know if a church is a good church, pay attention to the people who have been there for many years.

See what character it has produced in them. If you want to know if a pastor is a good pastor, pay attention to their family. Do they have a happy wife? Do they have faithful children? Do they have a calm and peaceful home? Or is it a place of conflict and discord? Dwayne Garrett suggests that verses 8-15 function as a concentric or chiasmic pattern, beginning with the shrewd and the fools in verse 8, then that's paralleled with the gullible versus the shrewd in verse 15, making amends for sin in verse 9 is paralleled with being repaid for sin in verse 14, secrets of the heart in verse 10, parallel with secrets of the heart in verse 13, and then at the heart, the destruction of the wicked versus the prosperity of the upright in verse 11, and the deceptive way to death in verse 12.

The focus of this section is upon walking by faith, not by sight. There's an inexact antithesis in verse 8. The wisdom of the prudent matches with the folly of fools, but the one is associated with discerning his way and the other with deceiving. Perhaps the suggestion is that the folly of fools is self-deceiving.

Alternatively, the insight of the prudent in his way is something that brings light and insight to other people who are around them. Fools don't take sin seriously, and as a result they mark at the guilt offering and the need to make reparations for trespass. However, the upright are very mindful about the dangers of sin, and as a result they enjoy acceptance.

No one truly knows what another person is experiencing. The heart cannot be discerned

merely from outer circumstance. You can see someone's smile, but you do not know where the great sorrow may lie behind it.

It is both difficult to discern and difficult to communicate the true state of people's hearts. As a result, we should beware of presuming by outer circumstance or outer appearance to judge people's inner state. The warning not to judge by outward appearance continues in verse 11.

The house, naturally, looks much more secure than the tent, but yet a house of wickedness is much less secure than the tent of the upright. By outward appearance it may look often as if the wicked are truly flourishing and the righteous are failing, but yet with the eyes of faith we can see that this is not the case. We should appreciate the importance of living by faith within the Book of Proverbs.

It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing the Book of Proverbs as a book of living by a sort of sight, yet here and elsewhere we are reminded that there is more to the picture than meets the eye. Living by faith and not by sight is also a subject of verse 12. Things may seem right to the man by his sight, but yet that way can lead to death.

It is only the person who lives by faith and follows the law of God, accepting in the fear of the Lord his commandment, that will know the true way that leads to life. We must not merely judge by the outward appearance. Verse 13 is like verse 10.

We should not judge by present appearances. The laughter that the person may have may disguise an aching heart. In addition to recognizing that the present appearances are not the full picture of the present reality, we should also recognize that they do not give us a full indication of the long-term outcome.

The person who is experiencing joy now may find that joy turned to sorrow in the end. Both the backslider and the good man will receive the consequences of their ways. You reap what you sow.

This, like principles such as by their fruit you will know them, is a common theme in the Book of Proverbs. The prudent person is mindful and does not judge by surface appearances as the simple man does. The prudent person is led by the fear of the Lord and as a result gives thought to his way and does not merely judge by the outward appearance.

Folly is recklessness. The fool does not give thought to the future. He is allergic to reflecting upon where his actions are leading him.

He will squirm in discomfort whenever forced to think about future consequences. By contrast, the wise man is circumspect. He does not merely fixate upon present pleasures, trying to dismiss from his attention the way that things might be headed, to consider the harvest that the seeds of his present action might be sowing.

An example of the reckless person is the impetuous and quick-tempered person. But alongside this figure there is also the conniving schemer. The wise person contrasts with the impetuous and hot-headed man.

He is cool and level-headed. However, there is a cool-headed form of evil, of the schemer, but he is also doomed on account of his wickedness. The simple receive a destructive inheritance, but the prudent gain the honour of knowledge.

The evil and wicked persons will ultimately come under the dominion of the righteous. If you cannot exercise good rule over yourself, you will ultimately come under the rule of others. The dangers of both poverty and riches with respect to friendship are described in verse 20.

The poor person is cut off from friendship. No one wants to be the poor person's friend, because the poor person will be dependent upon them. But the rich has many friends.

All these people are gathered around them, wanting what they can give. Those friends are fair-weather friends, and they would rapidly abandon them were they to lose their wealth. This is not a justification for an attitude of indifference to the poor, as verse 21 makes plain.

The righteous person shows concern for their needy neighbour. Verse 22 contrasts the devising of evil to the devising of good. The former think that they are crafty, but they end up going astray, losing their way.

However, the righteous should devote shrewdness to the task of doing good, and they will receive steadfast love and faithfulness as a result. There are certain people who are all talk and no labour, but the person who really prospers will be the person who engages in true labour. This relates to the planning of verse 22.

The wise are rewarded. They enjoy wealth, honour, social status and authority. However, the folly of fools has its own natural consequence, which is folly itself.

What else would we expect it to bring? The effects of truthful and dishonest witnesses are described in verse 25. Truthful witnesses courageously deliver lives from death, whereas false witnesses will deceitfully condemn the innocent to death. The action of the false witness was previously described in relationship to his character.

Now it is described in relationship to his consequences. The fear of the Lord is at the centre of verses 26 and 27. The fear of the Lord grants confidence and enduring security.

It is the sustaining source of life and delivers one from the traps that lead to death. We can see a parallel between verse 27 and verse 14 of chapter 13. The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life that one may turn away from the snares of death.

This parallels the fear of the Lord with the teaching of the wise. The king is the highest example of the leader. A great leader finds his glory in the people around him, in the character that he has formed and encouraged in them, in their loyalty and in their love.

The prince's glory can be easily lost if he loses his people. By extension, the glory of a man is a happy and holy household, with a loving wife and faithful children. To enjoy this glory, he needs to recognise the value of those around him for his own honour and to treat them accordingly.

Slowness to anger is contrasted with hastiness of temper in the verse that follows. The understanding person is not reactive, but patient, self-controlled and the master of his own spirit. The fool, by contrast, can easily be incited to rash action.

And the next verse presses this point further. The well-governed heart is at peace, it's calm, it's content. However, the fool's heart is unsettled by envy, by passion, resentment and all these forms of bitterness, and it eats away at him from within.

The Lord is concerned for the poor, he's the protector and the patron of the poor. And the way that people treat the poor expresses either honour or dishonour towards him. The poor person is utterly dependent on the goodness and the generosity of others, much as we are utterly dependent upon the Lord.

The way that we treat those who are dependent upon us should reflect the way that God has treated us. And if we treat them with cruelty, we are making a statement about God by implication. We might think here of the parable of the unforgiving servant.

He is forgiven an incredible debt, but then he goes on to treat the man who has a debt to him with incredible cruelty. The wicked man comes to ruin through his own sin, but the righteous will be assured of a good end. Verse 32 suggests that Proverbs sees its principles resting in part upon post-mortem blessings and judgments, not just upon blessings in this life.

Wisdom rests, it is settled peacefully, in the heart of the understanding man. But it still makes itself known in the midst of fools. We might think of wisdom calling out to the simple earlier in the book, or the way that the wise person is revealed by contrast with fools that might surround him.

Ideally, we want to move towards the position where wisdom is at rest within us, not merely trying to make itself heard above the hubbub of folly. The true source of a people's greatness or decline is moral. Not military, not political, not economic or scientific.

If a people want to prosper, they must give themselves to righteousness and wisdom. The great illustration of this, of course, is the story of Israel in the books of the kings. The ideal in such a society is the elevation of righteous officials and the judgment of

shameful, treacherous, wicked and unfaithful ones.

Here we might consider what happens when the opposite occurs. King David, when he gives himself to sin in the story of Uriah and Bathsheba, ends up elevating treacherous and unreliable servants. He elevates Joab and other servants who do not obey his commandments exactly, who do not deliver his messages faithfully.

If we want our people to prosper, whether that's our nation, whether it's our church or our family, there must be righteousness in the hidden place. And that righteousness must spread out in the way that we treat and appoint and reward and encourage others around us. A question to consider.

How might we, in our current situations, move towards something of the glory of the king, as it is described in verse 28? The control of one's spirit and one's tongue is essential to wisdom. The quick-tempered person will tend to incite others' anger and will also respond to other people's anger with his own anger. Proverbs 15, verse 1 presents an alternative.

The person who responds to wrath with a gentle answer. If you control your own spirit, you will also be able to de-escalate emotionally fraught and volatile situations. The person who is able to speak calmly in such situations can dramatically change their dynamics.

The wise person who has such rhetorical skill and mastery will rightly make knowledge seem attractive. When you see someone who speaks with such wisdom, you will likely desire such control of your own tongue and mastery of speech for yourself. By contrast, the fool gushes forth folly.

Instead of the finely controlled tongue, the fool vomits out his foolishness. Like the wise, he makes his heart evident in the process, but not in a way that commends it to anyone. A spurt of wisdom is knowing that God sees all that we do.

He sees what we do and who we are in the secret place. He sees the unfeigned self. The wise person, mindful that they are seen by God, acts accordingly and develops deep integrity.

The evil person characteristically acts in a way that ignores this fact. When out of the sight of others, they indulge in sin, while putting on a good appearance elsewhere. The hidden secrets of hearts are, however, revealed in due time.

The gentle tongue can heal, like the tree of life. We've had a similar proverb to this in chapter 12, verse 18. There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

By contrast, the tongue of the perverse is violent. It damages and injures others. Verses

5 to 12 particularly concern formative instruction.

Verse 5 expresses the truth that we've encountered in various forms elsewhere and is a relatively straightforward antithetical parallelism. The blessings of righteousness include the profit that it brings, especially when contrasted with wickedness. The wise don't just have wisdom for themselves, but they scatter it abroad to others.

By contrast, the heart of fools is disordered. It has no knowledge to disperse. Bare religious ritual and service, apart from a right disposition of the heart towards the Lord, is worthless.

This is a point made in several forms in the Old Testament, in 1 Samuel 15, verse 22. And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. The wicked person may go through the most extravagant motions, offering the greatest of sacrifices.

However, if he is not offering his heart to the Lord, the sacrifice itself is an abomination. Isaiah 1, verses 11-15 speak about this. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, saith the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts.

I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath, and the calling of convocations, I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me.

I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. True sacrifice ought to be a sort of enacted prayer, confirmed in practice in which the author presents himself and his works to the Lord. This verse is not opposing prayer and sacrifice, these two things belong together, rather it is underlining what true prayer and sacrifice entail.

Verse 9 is paired with the proverb that preceded it. If the sacrifice and prayer of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, so is the way of the wicked. Both the wicked person's vertical worship and his horizontal way are abhorrent to God.

The pairing of these two proverbs also suggests the integrity of worship in a way that should be characteristic of the righteous. When we first encounter them, discipline and reproof can be resisted and rejected. However, those who consistently reject reproof and

discipline will ultimately face unavoidable discipline and reproof as they suffer the final bitter consequences of their chosen course.

The person who hates reproof will suffer the ultimate and decisive judgment in the form of death itself. In verse 3 we were told that the eyes of the Lord are everywhere, watching the good and the wicked. In verse 11 his sight extends to the grave of Sheol and Abaddon, the place of destruction.

By implication these are realms to which he will condemn the wicked, whose hearts are no less open and exposed to him. Hebrews chapter 4 verses 12 to 13 declares, For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Wisdom is out there in the world. It is in the voice of parents, in the counsel of the wise, in the word of the law, in the company of the righteous, and in many other such places. Besides having a heart that is unreceptive to wisdom, the fool will generally develop ways to avoid being exposed to wisdom, which he greatly dislikes.

Scoffing is a defensive mechanism against wisdom. Whenever he starts to feel the uncomfortable gravity of wisdom, the fool will employ the levity of scoffing. He will also use it to ridicule the wise, rather than learn from them.

Proverbs chapter 14 verse 7 declares, Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge. One of the reasons why this holds true is because the fool is so allergic to wisdom. Out of this allergy to wisdom, the fool will avoid the wise, and for their part, the wise know better than to tarry in the presence of fools.

The heart has a powerful effect upon a person's appearance and upon their spirit. The downcast heart will be seen in a person's countenance and also in their depressed manner. Conversely, the glad heart will be seen in a lively manner and in a cheerful face.

The heart colours everything else. The wise have hearts hungry for knowledge, but fools have mouths that feed on folly. The implication here may be that the fool's mouth feeds on folly in his constant speaking of foolishness, whereas the wise man seeks knowledge by inner meditation upon the truth, by ruminating upon the word of God.

Verse 15 highlights the importance of the inner condition over the outer. The person who is joyful in heart will be like someone enjoying a continual feast, irrespective of the external circumstances that he experiences. Verses 16 and 17 which follow underline the importance of the state of a person's heart over their outward situations.

A heart that fears the Lord and loves its neighbour with little material wealth is greatly to be preferred to great wealth and fine meals without these things. Proverbs 4.23

counselled, Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. These verses provide just another reason why this counsel is so important.

Verse 1 declared, A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Now the same principle is pressed further. It's related to the characters behind the words.

The heart-tempered man gives harsh words, but the man who is slow to anger can give the soft answer. The one who masters his own spirit can also be the master of his words and consequently the master of situations. The sluggard who wishes to avoid all exertion feels his way to be nothing but insurmountable obstacles.

By contrast, uprightness and diligence will lead to one's way seeming smooth, straight and easy. As Michael Fox observes, there are other potential interpretations here. The sluggard's chosen path is difficult.

By laziness, procrastination and avoidance of labour, the sluggard ends up condemning himself to a much more difficult path than that of the diligent. If he had set about his work diligently and straight away, he would find it much easier than he does in the end. Another possibility is that the sluggard's way is a hedge of thorns because he, unlike the upright, has never cleared it.

His laziness again makes things harder for him than they need to be. Verse 20 recalls earlier proverbs in the collection, in chapter 10 verse 1 especially which opens this collection, but also in chapter 12 verse 1 and 13 verse 1. This is followed by another proverb tracing back folly and wisdom to the desires and loves of the heart. The fool finds joy in his folly, but the wise man walks on a straight path, by implication because he loves wisdom.

Counselors are important for wise deliberation. The fool simply wants to be confirmed in his way. He will mostly listen to flatterers and shut his ears to anyone else.

However, the wise man will seek a multitude of advisers. He will be careful not merely to listen to one set of voices. He wants various wise perspectives, so that informed by these in his deliberations, he can adopt a wise path.

He won't just look for whatever expert agrees with him, but will search for wise voices of various viewpoints and test them against each other. The plans of people that have been so formed and tested are much more likely to succeed. Being able to give a word in season, knowingly to speak the right thing as the right person, in the right place and at the right time, is a great hallmark of wisdom.

It's essential to the proper use of the proverbs themselves. The wise man appreciates that there is more to the truth than merely a statement being true in the abstract. To speak is to act.

It's to deliver a specific truth in a specific context with a specific end. A claim that is true in the abstract may easily be the wrong thing to say at a given time. The wise are keenly alert to this, and this is one of the respects in which they have mastered their tongues.

The stakes of the life of wisdom are great. The prudent person is not merely seeking benefit in this present life, but following the path of life upwards, moving away from the domain of death and the grave towards enduring fellowship with God. The Lord intervenes in history against the proud, bringing down oppressors that vaunt themselves over and prey upon others.

Here the pair is that of the proud and the widow, one of the most vulnerable figures. The Lord acts against the proud and for the sake of the widow. He tears down the former and he establishes the latter.

Elsewhere in Scripture the Lord presents himself as the guardian of the widow and the fatherless. He fills the place where the male guardian would otherwise have been. The Lord finds the plans of the wicked abhorrent, which is one of the reasons why he acts in judgment against them.

However, gracious words are pure and delightful to him. The Lord is pleased with the lips of the wise. In verse 25 the house of the proud is torn down by the Lord, and in verse 27 the greedy bring trouble upon their household by pursuing unjust gain.

From the antithetical parallel, this unjust gain is presumably received from bribes. Such bribes would pervert justice and gain favour at the expense of others. The wicked and the righteous are the subject of verses 28 and 29.

Once more in verse 28 we see the difference between the righteous man, who weighs his words, and the wicked who just vomits out his evil. The Lord abhors the wicked and is far from them. He doesn't hear them.

However, he delights in the well-governed heart of the righteous, and he hears such a man's prayers. The person bringing good news enlivens others. Bruce Waltke suggests that the messenger bringing good news reveals the goodness of his news in his eyes, and when that news is received, its effect is felt throughout the whole body of the receiver.

Fox differs. He argues that it is the sight of the eyes that is intended here. Referring to what one sees, not to the light in another person's eyes.

Reprove gives life, and the person who heeds it and seeks it out will dwell among the wise. He will seek out their company, but he will also become one of them in time. The Book of Proverbs often unmasks the true character of the desires and the practices of fools.

In Proverbs 8, verse 36, for instance, wisdom declares that those who hate her love death. They may not realise it, but that is what they truly desire. We like to presume that we know the true character of our desires.

However, there are times when, after foolishly pursuing our desires, and having tasted their bitter fruit, we might say, that really wasn't what I was looking for. Proverbs tends to put this rather differently. The bitter fruit reveals what the foolish desire was about from the beginning.

The person who ignores instruction is proud. The last thing that we might think is that he despises himself. However, if he does not despise himself, why is he running headlong and unheeding towards his own utter ruin? The one who heeds reproof, by implication, is the man who truly respects himself.

Throughout the Book of Proverbs and the other wisdom literature, the fear of the Lord is especially held forth as that which is most fundamentally characteristic of wisdom. Different places foreground different facets of the fear of the Lord. It can be seen as an honouring of the Lord's teaching, in Proverbs 1.7 for instance.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Psalm 112.1 connects this with delighting in the Lord's commandments.

Praise the Lord! Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments. In Proverbs 8.13 it is hatred of evil, especially seen in pride, arrogance and perverted speech, that comes to the foreground. The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil, pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.

Job 28.28 emphasises a shewing of evil in this connection. And he said to man, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. A sense of reverence for the Lord and His holiness is the emphasis in chapter 9.10 of Proverbs.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. In our passage it is humility that is especially emphasised. The fear of the Lord is manifest in a humble heart.

Proverbs 22.4 draws a similar connection. The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honour and life. The humility in question is a humility arising out of a profound consciousness of God.

Such a humble person is a person who considers himself in the light of and in the sight of God. His humility is one of honouring the Lord over all else. He is contrite in spirit.

He trembles at the Lord's word. For this reason the Lord's commandments are His meditation and His delight, heeded over all other voices. His heart is not lifted up.

However, he fears the Lord rather than man. When we think of humility we can often focus on it as a trait inherent in someone, rather than seeing it primarily as a responsive and relative posture to someone else. The humble person, we might think, is simply deferential, submissive, unassertive, obliging and nice more generally.

However, the humility of the person with the fear of the Lord is such that he fears the Lord over all others. Such a person can be firm, assertive, uncompromising and bold precisely out of this humility. His heart is captured by a sense of the Lord's holiness.

He dares not ignore the Lord's word. Such a person is not proud, arrogant or exalted in his own mind, but he will humbly stand firm against, resist, oppose, offend and even hurt others, rather than dare to disobey his Lord. A question to consider.

What are some ways in which we can cultivate this sort of humility and avoid various counterfeits? The first nine verses of chapter 16 of Proverbs form a unit. All but verse 8 have the name of the Lord within them. These verses are bookended by Proverbs concerning the Lord's control over the plans of men and the Proverbs that follow them in verses 10 to 15 mostly concern the King.

Verses 1 to 4 are particularly focused upon the superintendence and providence of the Lord. People may deliberate about the words that they are going to say in their heart, but when the time comes to speak, it is the Lord who is sovereign over what is said. In Luke chapter 12 verses 11 to 12, Jesus promises his disciples that he will give them the words to say when they are in a situation of trial.

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. While it focuses upon speech, this verse makes a more general point about the way that the Lord oversees and superintends all action. We may have the most elaborate plans, but ultimately it is the Lord who decides what happens.

1 John chapter 3 verse 20 declares that God is greater than our heart and he knows everything. Verse 2 speaks of the person who thinks in his presumption that all of his ways are right. The Lord, however, weighs both the paths that such a person takes and the spirit that governs him.

He knows the true reality of a person's heart, and even though we may delude ourselves, we cannot delude God. God perceives and he judges the true intentions of our heart. Out of these first two verses arises the third.

If the Lord is the one who ultimately disposes all our ways and our words, and if the Lord is the one who truly knows the hearts of men and weighs them, then we should commit our work and our plans to the Lord, praying that he will establish what we do. God's

sovereignty is expressed even further in verse 4. The Lord is the one who has made all things, not just in the sense of creation, but also in the sense of fashioning things towards their purpose in history. He has even made the wicked for the day of trouble.

The apostle Paul speaks of this sovereign providence of God in Romans chapter 9 verses 17 to 24. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, Why have you made me like this? Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles? Knowing the sovereignty of our Creator, we should not have our hearts lifted up. Whatever plans and intentions we might have in our hearts, God is greater than our hearts. Man proposes, but God disposes.

Knowing this, we should humbly commit our ways to him. However, the person who lifts themselves up in arrogance will be punished. Verse 6 speaks of iniquity being atoned for by steadfast love and faithfulness.

There is debate about whether this is God's steadfast love and faithfulness, or whether it is the human being's. Is the point here that a sacrifice needs to be confirmed by faithful practice, or is the point ultimately that the Lord is the one who atones, and that he does so on account of his steadfast love and faithfulness? That would certainly seem to be the more theologically attractive reading. Bruce Waltke doubts whether it is the actual reading, however.

Given the use of this language elsewhere, he thinks it must refer to the human being's steadfast love and faithfulness. We have another occurrence of such language in Proverbs 3.3. Michael Fox suggests that we might hear the language of Exodus 34.6-7 here. ...in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

The second verset of the Proverbs speaks about the fear of the Lord as the means by which we turn away from evil. If the first half is about the atoning for sin, the second half is about the transformation of life. The cause of this is the fear of the Lord, a profound sense of the Lord's holiness with a corresponding sense of humility and a desire to obey

him and honour him in all that one does.

If you want to turn away from evil, look to the Lord. His greatness, his goodness and his holiness are a spur to transformation of life. Verse 7 gives us another reason why it is wise to commit one's way to the Lord.

When the ways of a man are pleasing to the Lord, he will guard that person's way, he will protect them from harm, he will be a shield around that person. A significant example of the Lord's protection of his people, ensuring that their enemies will not strike them, can be seen in Exodus chapter 34 verses 23 to 24. Verse 8 is the exception in verses 1 to 9, it's the one verse that does not include the name of the Lord within it.

However, it is very similar to a verse from the previous chapter which does include the name of the Lord. But the righteous man will be established by the Lord and ultimately he will flourish and prosper. Verse 9 returns us to the principle described in verse 1. Here, however, it is the Lord's establishment of the steps of a man that is especially emphasised.

We must therefore commit ourselves to the Lord, praying for his guidance, seeking that in his gracious providence he will preserve us from evil, that he will guide us in the good way, that he will establish the work of our hands and in his goodness that he will bring us at last to his heavenly kingdom. In verses 10 to 15 we move from the Lord to the King. However, the way that the King is described, we could replace the name of the Lord for the King and the Proverbs will be very similar to ones that we have encountered earlier.

The righteous King reflects the character of God. He acts in the name of God. Within the Davidic covenant, the righteous King is described as the Son of God.

The King here speaks wisdom that comes directly from God. An oracle is on his lips. His lips are supposed to convey the judgement of God himself.

Justice ultimately comes from God and must be upheld by the King in the Lord's name. Elsewhere we see the word and the authority of God closely aligned with the words of the wise and also with the authority of parents. In addition to judgement, weights and measures must be true and just.

False measures are driven by covetousness. They are an attempt to defraud others. However, just weights and measures are pleasing to the Lord.

They are in keeping with the Lord's own character. The King is the exemplary man. In the character of Solomon and David we see this most powerfully.

Solomon, for instance, is the one who exemplifies wisdom. He is a new Adam ruling in the midst of a new Eden. Nations and kings' thrones are established by righteousness.

As we read through the story of 1 and 2 Samuel and the story of the kings, the fortunes of Judah and Israel are repeatedly seen to depend upon the righteousness or the unrighteousness of their kings. In addition to righteous deeds, the King is concerned for righteous lips. For a king to judge wisely, he has to be aware of the people around him.

He has to be alert to their character and he has to surround himself with just people. The King is on the lookout for those of righteous lips. Those who speak uprightly manifest their righteous character and as a result will be the sort of people with whom he wants to surround himself and by whose service and counsel he wants to rule.

In the King's desire for people of righteous lips, he is once again comparable to the Lord. In Proverbs 12, verse 22, lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are His delight. The King is a man not just of wisdom and righteousness, but a man of power.

His wrath is able to bring death. He has the power of death and life committed to him as an agent of the Lord's judgment. The wise man who counsels the King, however, is able to assuage the King's anger.

This implies both the power of the words of wisdom, but also the tractability of the King. A good King is someone who expresses anger when it needs to be, but also who surrounds himself with people who can assuage it when it would best be appeased. The King's countenance when it shines upon someone in favour is like the life-giving light of the sun.

Alternatively, His favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain, the rain that would come to ensure the harvest. If death is in the power of the King in verse 14, life is in the power of the King in verse 15. Waltke suggests that in verses 16 to 19, we have something akin to a miniature prologue.

It reminds us of much of the material of chapters 1 to 9. Chapter 3, verses 13 to 14, Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold. Proverbs 8, verses 10 to 11, Chapter 8, verse 19, A man is once again defined by his way. He both turns away from evil and he guards his way from unrighteousness.

By the negative implication of verse 18, he is also defined by humility. His heart is not lifted up, he fears the Lord, and as a result does not hold an exalted opinion of himself. His lowliness of spirit and his association with the poor might make us think of the Beatitudes and the way that Jesus blesses the meek and the lowly in spirit.

Verses 20 to 24 are particularly concerned with speech. In verse 20, we see that the person who gives thought to the word will discover good, something that is paired with the blessedness of the one who trusts in the Lord. The implication here is that trusting in

the Lord is associated with giving thought to the word.

The word here might be the word received, the word of the wise, the commandment of the Lord that is meditated upon. It might also refer to words that are spoken, that the wise man meditates upon and reflects upon before he utters. The words of the righteous and the wise are not just upright and true, they are words that are carefully fashioned for the situation.

They are words that are beautiful and persuasive, they are sweet here, and as a result they move people to appropriate action. Aristotle spoke of the various forms of persuasion as ethos, pathos and logos, the first relating to the personal character of the speaker, ethos, the second putting the audience into a certain frame of mind in order to move them, the pathos, and the third, the logos, the reasoned discourse by which the case is proved. The wise person has a depth, soundness and integrity of character that enables him to marshal ethos powerfully.

He also has the faculties to make a strong and reasoned case for a position. And beyond these things he also has the power to delight and to move an audience, to speak to them in a way that moves their feelings. In its own distinctive terminology, the Book of Proverbs here is speaking about all these different aspects of speech, the ethos of deep moral character and integrity that renders the speech of the wise man a fountain of life of good sense, the insight and understanding by which the heart of the wise can speak judiciously and persuasively, and the pathos by which he can speak graciously and beautifully, words that are like a honeycomb, words that bring delight but also which bring healing.

In verse 25, once again we see the limitations of man's understanding of his way. A man may be presumptively confident in his actions and yet be on the way to death. This is why it is so important that we commit our ways to the Lord.

This reminds us of verse 2. The worker's appetite is one of the things that drives him on. If a man had no appetites, he would not be spurred to act. A man's hunger, a man's desire for love, a man's desire for honour and status, all of these things drive him to work, to create, to produce, to perform great deeds.

In this way a man's mouth, his hunger, can properly handled be something that plays in his favour, that serves to inspire him to productivity and greatness. Verses 27-29 all concern different types of evil men, the worthless man, the dishonest man and the man of violence. The first man, the worthless man, is a troublemaker who plots evil and whose speech ignites and causes damage.

The dishonest man, through his lies, his rumours and his tail-bearing, spreads discord and he divides people who were once close together. The man of violence is one who spreads his violence to others by enticing other people to join him. Verse 30 describes

the way that he communicates in a way that is deceptive and underhand, communicating furtively with his body language, while saying something very different with his mouth.

The fifth commandment, to honour father and mother, can be applied more broadly in the honouring of elders. Respect for those of greater age is on a number of accounts. First, we are the beneficiaries of the sacrifices of such persons and those that inherit the legacy that they have left for us.

Second, they are people who have experienced a number of different seasons of life and as a result have the experience of sowing and reaping and the wisdom that comes with experiencing and observing a number of these different cycles in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. Such experiential wisdom can be communicated in words, but it cannot just be reduced to words. Verse 32 expresses one of the great principles of the Book of Proverbs.

The person who is slow to anger, who is not reactive and who is patient, is someone who is truly mighty. While an impetuous man can perform great deeds of greatness in the world outside, if he cannot master himself, he is not able to exercise true rule. True authority and control begins with mastering yourself.

Once you have mastered yourself, you will be able to lead others. The person who cannot master themselves, however, is the reactive victim of all the forces that are around them. They are not operating by their reason, but they are the plaything of their untamed passions.

The true mighty man, the true leader, is the one who rules his spirit, who has taken the inner city of his life. This same principle is expressed in a negative form in chapter 25, verse 28. A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.

The analogy of the self and the walled city is a powerful one. The walled city can be besieged by all sorts of forces. There can be great tumult and unrest and war outside of the city.

But if the city has sure and certain and strong walls, life within the city can continue calm and untroubled. The final verse of the chapter returns us to the principles with which it began. The Lord is the one who disposes all events, the greatest event to the smallest event.

Even the small events that might be attributed to chance are actually the actions of God, in this case the lot that is cast into the lap. A question to consider. If a man's spirit is like a city that must be taken and ruled, what in our governing of our spirits might be comparable to the walls by which a city is defended? Proverbs chapter 17 begins with a proverb reminiscent of Proverbs chapter 15, verse 17.

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it. Here the house of feasting seems to refer to a house full of sacrifices. The peace and harmony of a household is its greatest wealth, and not even great banquets can compensate for its lack.

In this image of a strife-filled house enjoying peace offerings, we might think of the example of the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, when some are eating before others, some are going home drunk, and others are going home hungry. What should have been a great celebration of their oneness in Christ in the celebration of the Lord's Supper actually ends up being quite the opposite. Even a dry morsel, if it were expressive of the peace and unity of a household, would be preferable to that.

The status that a person comes to enjoy can depend far more upon their character than upon their birth. While the son of the house has great advantage over the servant, he can by his folly fall from his position, and the servant, for his part, can be raised up. Although we are rightly attentive to the disparities of birth within a society, we should also pay attention to the way in which people can rise and fall as a result of their folly or their wisdom.

Verse 3 is similar to a statement that we find elsewhere in Proverbs chapter 27, verse 21. The Lord tests hearts in a similar way. The testing of the hearts in view here is probably not just the Lord's seeing of the heart.

Rather, what might be in view is the Lord's testing of a heart by bringing someone into difficult situations, situations that will reveal, by the person's response, the true character that they have. Among other things, this is a warning against presumption. We can easily focus upon how we appear to others, but the true character of our heart will be revealed as the Lord tests us.

It is His inspection that we should be most concerned about. Wicked people listen to wicked lips, and liars give heed to lies. The people who are the source of wickedness and falsehood are also attracted to those things in other people's speech, and as a result they are susceptible to being caught in the same sort of trap that they lay for others.

Verse 5 warns against *schadenfreude* towards the poor. We should not take delight in the misfortunes of the poor. The second verset suggests that it is the economic and material calamities that have struck them that will have encouraged the mockery.

The Lord's concern for the poor here is described in ways that are similar to those in chapter 14, verse 31. Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him. Our proper posture to the person who is in distress, even our personal enemy, should be concern and care.

We can see this in chapter 25, verses 21-22. The glory of old age is spoken of earlier in

chapter 16, verse 31. Grey hair is a crown of glory.

It is gained in a righteous life. Here we are told that grandparents are crowned with their grandchildren. As grandparents are surrounded by their grandchildren, they are already seeing and enjoying the harvest of the legacy that they have stored up.

There is, however, a reciprocal glory here. Children also glory in their parents and grandparents and those who have gone before them. Elsewhere in this chapter there are statements of the shame that foolish children can bring to their parents.

In verse 21, And in verse 25, Righteous children, however, are a glory to their parents and vice versa. The righteous son will honor his father and mother and will treat the teaching that they have given him as akin to a wonderful ornament. It's his glory.

Earlier in the book we saw the connection between the way of wisdom and the fifth commandment, honoring father and mother. That same principle, expressed in a more elaborate form here, shows the mutual glory that is characteristic of the way of wisdom, where the generations glorify each other and a whole family built up in mutual honor and consequent strength is naturally elevated in such a manner. Bruce Waltke observes that most of the proverbs from verse 7 to verse 28 are synthetic or synonymous parallelisms concerning fools.

We see in verse 7 the mismatch of traits, fine speech and fools and false speech and princes. If the first, the fine speech in the mouth of the fool, is unfitting, the false speech in the mouth of the prince is so much more so. Princes, by implication, should be characterized by noble and true speech.

Bribery is a form of exploitation and perversion of justice. By requiring bribes, justice could be withheld from the poor. Justice would also become partial to the rich and the corrupt, who are able to buy off judges.

Verse 8 is difficult to understand, but it may be referring to the way that the person who gives bribes perceives them. He sees it as like a magic stone that gives him special powers. Wherever he turns it, he will get his way.

Perhaps in its reference to the fact that it is in the eyes of the person who gives the bribe that it is a magic stone, we are given to understand that this is ultimately foolish and that the reality is not actually as the bribe-giver fancies it to be. Perhaps because one day he will face a justice from which no bribe will allow him to escape. The danger of gossiping and tail-bearing is described in verse 9. Earlier, in chapter 10, verse 12, we were encouraged to practice discretion with respect to other people's faults.

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses. By spreading the word of what someone has done wrong, gossip makes reconciliation near impossible. While the verse that follows makes clear that this covering up is not just an ignoring of what has been

done wrong, it does encourage us to deal with such wrongs in a posture of gentleness and forgiveness.

We want, if at all possible, to heal the wound and the breach between two people, and as a result, we draw no more attention to the wrong than needs to be drawn to it to rectify the harm and the division that it has caused. We should be forgiving and tractable, looking for the possibilities of reconciliation and healing, doing all in our power to avoid exacerbating the wound that has been caused. The gossip and the tail-bearer, by contrast, love to spread the word of such wrongs and to make the divisions stronger by their actions.

The righteous man seeks to de-escalate situations, and one of the best ways to do this is to deliver a rebuke in private. Such a rebuke will allow for a person to repent and for a relationship to be restored, without requiring costly public loss of face. There is a wisdom in the way that we give a rebuke.

There is also a wisdom in the way that we receive it. The man of understanding, who is characterized by the wisdom that receives reproof and correction, is deeply sensitive to rebuke. He always prizes correction, knowing that it is the way in which he can grow in wisdom.

The fool, in his pride, however, resists correction and rebuke, and even a hundred blows upon his body would be less effective than a few well-chosen words in the ears of the wise. The insensitivity of the fool to correction is one of the reasons why he does face these severe consequences. As he has resisted correction, he ends up inviting far more painful punishment and consequences.

Verse 11 describes the fate that awaits the rebellious evil man. The Lord, presumably, will send a cruel messenger against him. He will face his comeuppance.

A fool is a dangerous person to be around, described in verse 12 as like a she-bear robbed of its cubs. The she-bear robbed of her cubs is deadly and implacable. While the fool described here may not be as willfully violent as a she-bear robbed of her cubs, he is no less dangerous, and people should give him a very wide berth.

Those around such persons are always in danger of becoming collateral damage of their folly. Beyond the way that our characters are affected by the company that we keep, we can also suffer some of the consequences that come upon those with whom we are in association. This is an added reason to steer well clear of the fool.

Perhaps an example of this could be seen in the verse that follows. Those who give evil in exchange for good will find that evil clings to their house. Anyone associated with such a house will consequently suffer.

The beginning of a conflict is like a breach in a dam. A small initial trickle of water that

will soon lead to a great opening and a torrent coming forth. Those who recognize the warning signs will get away as soon as possible.

Once that dam starts to burst, things will be said that can't be taken back. Actions may be taken that may provoke vengeance. Far better to leave the situation before tempers overflow.

The task of the person delivering justice is to condemn the wicked and to justify the righteous. A failure to condemn the wicked and a failure to justify the righteous are both an abomination to the Lord. Neither can be excused.

The failure of omission is not to be considered minor in comparison to the sin of commission in relation to justice. Verse 16 imagines a situation where a fool comes to buy wisdom. First of all, wisdom cannot be bought so simply.

Wisdom has to be learned. A fool who seeks to buy wisdom is like a man with no mouth buying food. Without sense, the fool has no ability to receive the food of wisdom.

Verse 17 speaks about other companions that we have in our lives. The friend who is with us constantly and the family member who is most likely to be by our side when something goes badly wrong. Friends can forsake people in the time of poverty and need.

Brothers are more likely to be found at that point. However, there are exceptions. Chapter 18 verse 24 speaks of this.

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Chapter 6 verses 1 to 5 give an extended warning against putting up security for a neighbor. In verse 18, another such warning is found.

Verse 19 speaks of the way that love of transgression goes hand in hand with the love of strife. Michael Fox suggests that the door that is made high is a reference to the one who makes his opening high, which is a reference to the mouth that speaks haughty and proud words. If this is the case, it will go very neatly with the verse that follows.

Verses 21 and 25 express the bitterness and the sorrow of the foolish son. This should remind us of the proverb with which the larger collection begins. A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.

In chapter 10 verse 1, this principle is an added spur to the good father to raise up his son in the way of wisdom. If he does not, he will end up hating his son and finding his son a cause of shame and sorrow, when faithful children and grandchildren could be his crown. The joy that is absent from the father of the fool is picked up in verse 22, as we see that the joyful heart is good medicine.

Such a joyful heart will give healing to every aspect of someone's life. Irrespective of outer circumstance, the joyful heart can bring balm. We've earlier read similar principles to this.

In chapter 15 verse 13, a glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed. The discerning sets his face towards wisdom. He's focused on this as his object and his goal.

The eyes of the fool flick to the ends of the earth. He wants the blessings that wisdom gives, but he looks in all the wrong places. We might think here of the words of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 11 to 14.

For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it? But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it.

The fool looks to the farthest reaches of the world, in part because he refuses to accept that wisdom is what the Lord has declared it to be, that it's so near at hand and clear as to what it entails. He wants something foreign and strange and esoteric, but in reality wisdom is something that will humble him in his pride, calling for the fear of the Lord above everything else. Job chapter 28 is an extended poetic expression of this fact.

In verses 20 to 28 of that chapter, But he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then he saw it and declared it, he established it and searched it out, and he said to man, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. Verses 23 and 26 describe forms of perverse justice, the wicked that accepts the bribe in secret, and then the person who imposes a fine upon the righteous man or strikes the upright noble.

Where such things take place, justice boils down to tyranny and mere power, rather than being founded upon truth. The final two verses express once more the principle of self-control at the heart of knowledge, and mastery of lips as indicative of its presence. The person who is wise knows that much of the time wisdom is to be found in his holding his tongue, in not speaking into a situation that he could make volatile, in not speaking in situations where he lacks the necessary understanding, in holding his tongue in response to a slight, or in not pridefully advancing his voice over others.

The importance of this ability to hold one's tongue is seen in the fact that even a fool can be seen to be intelligent if they practice this, how much more so the person who is genuinely wise. A question to consider. Verses 16 and 24 describe the foolish ways in

which fools can seek after wisdom itself.

What are some of the characteristic faults of fools that render their quest for wisdom futile? Proverbs chapter 18 begins with a warning against the separatist. Such an individual cuts himself off from a community that might check him in his desires. He seeks pretexts for quarrels and ends up being just an authority to himself.

His proud wisdom in his own eyes leads him to cut himself off from the wisdom and the insight of the group. Solomon describes this as his breaking out against all sound judgment or competence. Such a man is completely unteachable.

He cuts himself off from the sort of community that might stress test his opinions, that might force him to reconsider. Such a person might, for a period of time, throw in his lot with a particular teacher or some crank expert who supports his opinions, but before long he will differ with them too and cut himself off from them in their turn. Any wise leader of a community should know this type of person and be on the lookout for them.

When an individual has a series of previous communities that they've been a member of before leaving those communities on account of pointless quarrels, the leader of the new community that they want to join should be aware that, despite all of their flattery, they are a very dangerous sort of person to have around. One of the things that this proverb highlights for us is the importance of community for wisdom. The separatist has a very narrow trust network, whereas the wise man tries to spread out his trust network very widely.

He multiplies his counsellors and tests different opinions against each other. He places himself in the sort of community where people might correct him. In these respects, his humility greatly contrasts with the pride of the separatist who presumes that he has no need for a community around him.

The pride of the fool is also the subject of verse 2. The fool, once again, is defined by his pleasure. If people don't have an appetite for wisdom, they won't pursue it. And the fool does not want wisdom at all.

What he desires to do is to express his opinion. He's always spouting off. He's the pub expert.

He's not prepared to have his opinion tested or challenged. All he wants is to have it flattered and affirmed. Of course, the opinion of the fool is a foolish opinion, and in the process of expressing his opinion, he exposes his character to any that are wise in the vicinity.

One of the most notable effects of wickedness and folly is disgrace and contempt. The fool who cuts himself off from others and their wisdom, who won't listen to them but will just spout his own foolish opinion, will end up being disgraced and dishonoured. No one

will have a high opinion of him.

Wisdom, by contrast, is compared to water. Deep waters like those of a well. Flowing waters like those of a fountain and a bubbling brook.

Deep waters suggest the refreshing profundity of good speech. The fountain and the bubbling brook suggest their outflow and their constant source. They constantly spring up from the depths of the heart.

Verse 5 might seem by itself to be a fairly banal statement, although Michael Fox observes that we should take the good in a more pragmatic sense. No good will come of being partial to the wicked or depriving the righteous of justice. While people might think in an abstract moral sense that it is not good to do these things, it's a different question when it comes to actual social expediency.

Maybe in some exceptional situations it's more convenient to be partial to the wicked or deprive the righteous of justice. Maybe some good results will come from it. This verse makes very clear that no such good would result.

Verses 6 and 7 concern the mouth and the speech of the fool. The foolish speech of the fool is his own worst enemy, as we've seen elsewhere in the book. In chapter 14, verse 3, By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back, but the lips of the wise will preserve them.

The speech of the fool, whether it's lies, words inciting to violence, spreading rumours and gossip and slander, coarse jesting, scoffing, or some other form of foolish speech, it will all too often end up boomeranging back to him and hurting him. He can set a trap with his speech, but he'll be caught in it. From the folly of the speech of the fool, we move in verse 8 to the folly of the person who listens to gossip.

Gossip can be enticing, and once you're exposed to it, it's very hard to prevent yourself from just gulping it down. It has a sweet taste, but it produces bitter fruit within. These little tasty morsels of gossip can feed our deepest vices.

As they go down into the inner parts of the body, they end up affecting us deep within. For this reason, the wise person is careful not to attend to gossip, not to allow his ear to be tempted by it. The active work of destruction can bring about great damage, but the sluggard, the lazy man, who is unprepared to work to keep up his property, for instance, can wreak all sorts of damage upon it simply by his neglect.

The forces of entropy at work in the world don't wait for him, and it doesn't take long for things to deteriorate, for houses to become dilapidated, for fields and gardens to become overgrown with weeds, for underfed animals to become emaciated or to perish. Recognising the destructive power of the sluggard, one should be very careful of committing anything to his charge. Verses 10 and 11 deal with contrasting forms of

security.

The name of the Lord, representing God's power and presence, is like a place of refuge, somewhere that people can run to for safety. The Lord placed his name among his people in the temple, so that the people would look to the temple and pray to him and seek his deliverance. When in need, the people of God call out to him in prayer, depending upon his name for security.

However, the rich man can trust in his wealth, for the rich man, his riches are his source of security, that he will look to for safety in the day of trouble. They are like a high wall for him. However, the end of the verse reveals that this is the case in his imagination.

It's not necessarily the case in real life. True security is to be found in the name of the Lord alone. A common theme in the Book of Proverbs is the importance of humility for the gaining of wisdom, and the danger of pride.

The statement of verse 12 is very similar to ones that we've encountered earlier. In chapter 16, verse 18, pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. This verse seems to have been merged with chapter 15, verse 33, to form the statement of verse 12.

Chapter 15, verse 33 reads as follows. Rash and hasty speech is always a danger. The wise person ponders before he speaks.

Chapter 15, verse 28, the heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things. We've already seen the hastiness of the fool in his expression. A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

The fool is the person who always has the narrative ready to place upon events, even if he hasn't actually listened to what actually took place, and spent time to try and understand. So eager is he to express his opinion, but he won't give himself sufficient time of silence to inform himself, and as a result, he can't prevent himself from revealing himself to be the fool that he actually is. This is a cause of shame to him, and over time, his hastiness in expressing all of his hottest takes will lead any people of wisdom to place less and less store upon his words.

His words will merely be for the other fools who want to be confirmed in their opinions and their prejudices. Sadly, there is seldom a shortage of people who just want an appealing and affirming narrative, rather than attending to reality and to events, and gaining wisdom through careful reflection upon them. The importance of guarding one's spirit and heart is the subject of verse 14.

We've seen this principle before in the preceding chapter in verse 22. A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. A healthy spirit can bear one through the deepest forms of suffering and sickness, but there are few forms of trial that

are harder than that of bearing a crushed spirit.

Wisdom isn't just something that you're naturally born with. A person has to acquire wisdom, and this occurs as you have a heart that is ordered towards wisdom, and an ear that's pursuing it. So much of the Book of Proverbs is concerned with those things that orient us towards wisdom, recognising that it is the company that we keep, the people that we listen to, our willingness to accept rebuke and correction, the degree to which we honour the word of the Lord, whether we listen with respect to the instruction of our parents, whether we seek the counsel of the wise.

Wisdom is obtained in such a manner, and if you want to get wisdom, you need to begin by making sure that your heart is receptive to it, and that your ear is pursuing it. If those organs are not operating as they ought to be, your pursuit of wisdom will be utterly in vain. Verse 16 is a difficult verse to understand.

Is it expressing a positive view of the bribe, something that has been described in far less favourable terms elsewhere? Is it merely giving a descriptive account of the ways that bribes can be effective? There are other statements of this kind elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs. For instance, in chapter 21, verse 14, a gift in secret averts anger, and a concealed bribe strong wrath. It is by no means clear that what we are dealing with here is a gift intended to pervert the ways of justice, to ensure partiality to your cause in a dispute.

William McCain argues that what is imbued here is most likely a gift designed to win favour or an entree into the circle of a social superior who can assist you in your situation. It can prove wise to win friends through gifts and favours. Through your generous attitude towards others, others may end up being more solicitous of your welfare in the longer term future.

There are situations where legal proceedings may be almost interminable, and there is no way of deciding between two parties. In these sorts of civil disputes, it may be most effective to settle a matter by means of lots. We've read about lots earlier in chapter 16, verse 33.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. There are few situations that are harder to rectify than great trust betrayed. An offended brother is described in this way in verse 19, like a castle that's shut up against someone.

The person who committed the offence is outside and has little hope of getting in. Far better to ensure that you do not fall out with your brother in this way, to ensure that matters never reach that situation. Always deal with your anger before you get to the point of hasty words.

Leave the room before the argument breaks out. As you feel the first trickles of water

coming through the dam of your failing temper, escape the situation before that dam bursts. When you have fallen out, do whatever you can to be reconciled as quickly as possible.

Don't allow those fortifications to be built up between you. People live and die by their words. This is the subject of verses 20 and 21.

We've seen this expressed earlier on in many forms, particularly in places like chapter 12, verse 14. From the fruit of his mouth, the man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him. Your mastery, or your lack of mastery of your words, will end up determining the course of your life.

Hasty and foolish words will be a rod for your own back, and may ultimately lead you to death. But a well-trained spirit and careful lips will win you favour and honour and life. Proverbs chapter 19, verse 14 declares, House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord.

Here again we are told in verse 22 that a wife comes as favour from the Lord. The goodness of the wise wife is expressed in several different ways and at several different places in the book of Proverbs. Finding such a woman is closely related to success in the quest for wisdom herself.

The discovery of such a woman is never a sure thing. Any man who has married such a woman is well aware of his fortune, of the fact that his enjoyment of such a wife is not a result of his own great insight, but as a result of the goodness of the Lord who has brought such a woman across his path. It is right to see the kindness and the grace of God in bringing a good spouse into your life.

Such a gift should be received with humility and gratitude. Verse 23 makes a general statement about the world, the way that the poor have to speak in an ingratiating and deferential manner in order to get their case heard, whereas the rich answer them roughly and without concern. The rich are often presented in very negative ways in the book of Proverbs, ways that foreground their pride or their injustice or their cruelty to others.

This is another instance of such a portrayal. The chapter began with the character of the separatist. It ends by considering the person with many friends.

It is possible that such a person, despite having many friends, may still come to ruin. They may prove, in times of hardship, to be merely fair-weather friends, the man's companions abandoning him to his fate. However, there are types of friends that stick close in adversity.

In times of trouble, family are the first people that you reach out to, and there are certain cases of friends that stick even closer than these. Family and friends are also

described in verse 17 of chapter 17. A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

The friend, described in verse 24, is present at all times. He loves at all times, like the character in chapter 17, but like the good brother, he is also there in the time of adversity. A question to consider.

Verse 17 says, Wisdom, as we have seen elsewhere in the book of Proverbs, involves walking by faith, not by sight. The fear of the Lord leads us to trust in the instruction of the Lord, over those things that he forbids that seem more promising to our natural understanding. Proverbs chapter 19 opens with a principle that relates to this.

The poor man who walks in integrity is better off than the person who is deceitful and foolish in his speech. This is not immediately obvious. Maybe it becomes more apparent over time.

Recognising the truth of this statement requires faith in the moral governance of the Lord. Desires that are unchecked and untested by reason are not a good thing. When knowledge and understanding are lacking, being driven by your desires can lead you into all sorts of danger.

Unchecked desire is often the cause of precipitous action that brings people into trouble, provoking the sort of hastiness that this proverb describes as causing people to lose their way. However, when the fool loses his way in such a manner, he will far more typically blame the Lord than his own folly. He will blame the Lord for his misfortune, for the family that he put him in, for the neighbours that he has, for some of the circumstances that he has experienced in his life.

Anything but dealing with his own folly. Verses 4-7 largely deal with the impact of money upon friendship. Many who feign to be true friends of a rich man are merely driven by mercenary interests.

Meanwhile, the poor man, whose friendship may be a financial liability, is someone who is deserted by his friends. A man who is generous in handing out gifts will find many people clustering to him. Everyone is a friend to such a man, but it is very difficult to discern which of those friends are true, which will stick with him in hard times.

The poor man, by contrast, has the opposite struggle. Even those who are closely related to him may cut him off, because they are concerned that he might expect them to provide for him. The person who gets sense, or literally gets a heart, loves his own soul.

Such a man, in his quest for wisdom, is seeking his own best interests. The fool, by contrast, whether he knows it or not, loves death. Verses 5 and 9 are very closely related.

Verse 5, A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape. And verse 9, A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will perish. They are very similar, and they are also similar to other verses elsewhere in the book.

For instance, in Proverbs 21, verse 28, A false witness will perish, but the word of a man who hears will endure. When we encounter such repeated proverbs, we should be alert to the way that they play differently in different contexts. We should also consider their more subtle variations, which may be highlighted by the repetition of something in almost exactly the same terms.

This may encourage us to reflect upon the finer details. The repetition of a principle may also encourage us to recognize some literary pattern within the texts in which they are found. On other occasions, the repetition may serve primarily to underline a particular point.

It is not clear to me which, if any, of these things are occurring in this particular instance. However, perhaps if we looked more closely, one of these lines of investigation would reward us with some insight. Verse 10 expresses a principle that might surprise us in our modern sensibilities.

It might be compared in some respects to chapter 17, verse 7. Fine speech is not becoming to a fool, still less is false speech to a prince. It argues from the lesser to the greater. We know that riches in the hands of a fool are unfitting.

We might think of the character of Nabal, for instance. Great power over princes is even less fitting in the hands of a slave. We might be a bit shocked by this.

We think that the slave exercising power over the prince is a great and positive sign of social mobility. However, the parallel may be instructive. In the case of the fool, the fool has no inner principle by which to produce great wealth.

He is someone who will not keep his wealth. He squanders and wastes it and uses it in an unwise manner, in a manner that accentuates his vices. The wise man, by contrast, stewards his wealth well and uses it for the up-building of the entire community.

If the fool lacks the power to produce and to steward wealth well, the slave is someone who does not know how to exercise rule well. He is not even the master of himself. Being ruled by the slave is a very bad sign that you have come under an intense form of tyranny.

When your leaders are weak, dependent and ruled over by other authorities, they will become mere administrators of an authority that they cannot produce, have not produced and are beholden to. The slave is empowered. He is not actually powerful.

The prince, by contrast, is someone who has independent power of his own and hence is qualified to exercise rule. The whole community is poorer off when it is led by weak and dependent persons. If they cannot exercise true power over themselves, how on earth are they going to do so for the wider community? This is a principle that we encounter on several occasions in scripture.

For instance, in chapter 30 verses 20 to 21 of Proverbs, under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up, a slave when he becomes king and a fool when he is filled with food. And again, in Ecclesiastes chapter 10 verses 5 to 7, there is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler. Folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place.

I have seen slaves on horses and princes walking on the ground like slaves. Verse 11 expresses a two-stage process, the first which is being slow to anger, not being hot-headed, and the second which is the quality of graciously overlooking an offence. Being slow to anger gives one the time and the space to think through an issue, to reflect, deliberate and then come to a wise decision.

The person who has this characteristic is someone who is in a position then to forgive, he can overlook an offence, having considered it, not just reacted against it, but responded thoughtfully and after deliberation to the situation. Such a man, by virtue of his control over his own spirit, is able to bring healing to a situation. The goodness of a king is described in verse 12.

A similar description is found in chapter 16 verse 15. In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. The king's wrath can be a positive thing.

The threatening growl of the lion is a warning to any that might come close, and the might of the king described here is something that can bring peace to his realm, as no one will dare attack. One could think about the conversation that Susan has with Mr. Beaver in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* concerning the lion Aslan. Susan, concerned about meeting a lion, asks whether Aslan is safe, and Mr. Beaver responds by saying of course he isn't safe, but he's good.

The good king is supposed to be like such a lion, terrifying to the enemies of the people of God, but a source of health and peace to all within his realm. A man can be ruined by a foolish son, and his life can be made a continual misery and frustration by a quarrelsome wife. A successful society has a one body with many members quality to it.

When all of the people within such a society are working together and in harmony, all are made stronger by each other. However, in a quarrelsome society where people are at odds with each other, where council goes unheeded, where antagonisms exist, where people are in rebellion against their leaders, and those who are in authority prey upon

those under them, the entire society will be weakened as a result. Proverbs describes the dynamics of such a society elsewhere.

An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones. When a husband and wife are working together well, the husband gives his strength to his wife, and his wife glorifies him and brings him honour in the society. In a healthy society, a son receives wisdom from his father, a place in the world from his father, authority from his father, and the son who honours his father in such a society empowers his father even further, as by acting in his father's name he extends his father's dominion.

There is mutual honour between the generations in a healthy society. Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their father's. Proverbs 17, verse 6 A similar thing is true of a people and their leader.

A people can be glorified in a wise and good leader, and a king, for his part, is glorified by his people. Proverbs 14, verse 28 In a multitude of people is the glory of a king, but without people a prince is ruined. While wisdom builds people up then in mutual honour, folly produces societies where people are always tearing each other down, where everyone is weaker by virtue of the others.

In Proverbs 18, verse 22 We are told that he who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the Lord. A similar principle is expressed in verse 14, perhaps to counterbalance verse 13, and to present the positive vision of the wife, the wife as someone who glorifies her husband, and is received as a gift from the Lord. Finding a prudent wife is not something a man can take full credit for himself.

Ultimately this is a gift of the Lord, a sign of the Lord's favour. Verse 15 describes the way that slothfulness can sap people of their energies. The person who is slothful will find his energies forsaking him.

He is put, as it were, into a stupor. Where a person's resolve and their abilities are not engaged, they will gradually diminish. Once again, the source of life is keeping the commandment of the Lord.

Yet the meaning of the second half of verse 16 is not entirely clear, and different suggestions have been put forward for its interpretation. Michael Fox suggests that the original text should be read as a reference to a word, rather than his ways. However, it is also possible that despising his ways refers to the way that the foolish person has treated his way of life with disregard and contempt.

Ultimately he loves death and hates himself. The Lord is the patron and the protector of the poor. It is easy to practice a form of charity that makes others beholden to us, that puts others into our debt.

However, the Lord as the guarantor of the debts of the poor presents himself as the one who will repay the giver to them. It is indeed a remarkable notion that we could lend to the Lord, but the fact that the Lord is the guarantor of the poor protects the poor from being put in the debt of other people in a way that might lead to them being controlled. Paul expresses this same principle when he responds to great gifts by saying, My God will supply all your needs according to his riches in Christ Jesus.

He does not say, I am deeply beholden to you, I am in your debt. Rather he points them to God as his guarantor, the one who will ensure that they do not go unrewarded for what they have done. At various points in the book of Proverbs, disciplining one's children is seen as a sign of love and concern for them.

In verse 18 this is expressed in a particularly stark way. While a father still has hope, he should discipline his son. As long as his son's character has some degree of malleability to it, he should take the opportunity to discipline him, to ensure that he does not end up going in the way of death and folly.

However, as verse 19 expresses, there are some people who are so set in the ways of folly that any attempt to deliver them will be short-lived and ultimately futile. A man with a hot head will end up getting into trouble again and again. You will always be bailing him out until that character flaw has been dealt with.

You will always find yourself trying to pick up the pieces after his failures. Far better to address that character flaw when you still have the chance. This is also expressed to the son in verse 20.

To listen to advice and accept instruction sets you on the path to gain wisdom in the future. Proverbs 16 1-3 read Once again in verse 21 we see the power and the sovereignty of God as overruling the affairs of men. Whatever we may plan in our hearts, ultimately it is the will of the Lord that will stand.

Consequently, we should commit our ways to the Lord, so that our plans and our ways would prosper. Kindness or steadfast love is the fruit of a man, and a man is better off being a poor man than a liar. It is more beneficial for a man to produce steadfast love and kindness than to produce much wealth.

He would be better off being poor and truthful than to be rich and a fool and a liar. The fear of the Lord is a repeated theme as we have seen in the book, and here again in verse 23 the text returns to it. The fear of the Lord here is said to lead to life.

It is also the source of satisfaction and contentment. The person who has such fear will not ultimately be visited by harm. He may suffer certain misfortunes, but ultimately he will know the Lord's blessing.

The sluggard, even when he has the means for his satisfaction, will not take advantage

of them. Solomon compares this to a situation where the sluggard has a dish of food right in front of him, and he still cannot even exert himself to bring his hand to his mouth. Such resources are wasted on the sluggard, and as we see elsewhere in Proverbs, he will tend to lose them in time.

Punishment can serve not merely to judge and instruct the person who is punished, but also as a means of deterrence and instruction for others. When a scoffer is punished, the simple becomes wise. When a wise man is instructed, he gains knowledge.

Proverbs 21, verse 11. One of the ways that the simple can gain wisdom is by paying attention to the way that others are rebuked and punished for their actions. There is benefit to be gained from cautionary examples.

Verse 26 describes a situation where a son squanders his parents' wealth and dishonours them. We see something similar in Proverbs 28, verse 24, whoever robs his father or his mother and says, "'That is no transgression,' is a companion to a man who destroys.' Children must honour and build up the legacy that they receive from their parents. This duty to receive instruction and to walk in the path of wisdom is reinforced in the verse that follows.

The chapter concludes with a condemnation of false witnesses and of wicked people whose mouths feed upon iniquity, presumably in their speech. The fate of such persons is condemnation and beating. A question to consider.

In studying this chapter, we have considered the way that a healthy society is one in which people mutually honour and build up each other by their own gifts. How can we see this principle expressed elsewhere in the scriptures? Wine can be a great blessing. It can also be something that tests and reveals people's hearts.

Wine intoxicates. It loosens people's control over their bodies and their mental faculties. Lady Wisdom offers wine to her guests in chapter 9. But wine is a dangerous gift.

One can only receive this gift well if you are not given to it. It is a liberty that could easily take liberties with you. Proverbs chapter 20 begins with a warning against wine, against its power to serve as an influence over people.

Wine and strong drink are personified as a marker and a brawler. If you cannot maintain some mastery over your spirit in the presence of alcohol, the personality imputed to the alcohol itself will take you over. There are many people who have been ruined by drink, who become very different people as a result of the drink.

The description of alcohol here might invite some understanding of drink almost possessing a person. The person who gives himself to intoxicating substances will forfeit wisdom. We have warnings against drunkenness elsewhere in the book of Proverbs.

In chapter 21 verse 17, whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man, he who loves wine and oil will not be rich. In chapter 23 verses 20 to 21, And finally chapter 31 verses 4 to 5, In Proverbs chapter 19 verse 12, There is a similar statement here in verse 2, although there might be a subtle difference in that it is the terror of the king rather than the king's wrath that is like the growling of a lion. Here it is the fear of the king in potential enemies that serves as the growling of the lion.

The fearsome might of the king and the apparent danger of provoking him to anger causes people who might otherwise rise up against the people to draw back. Although it can be unsettling to think of this, the security and safety of a society can often rest in large measure upon the threat of violence and effective vengeance upon all who would threaten the general peace and all who would break the law. The ideal king is the one who can rule by means of his growl.

He does not generally need to bite or to engage in violence. The terrifying might of his growl is sufficient to drive off any enemy. In a society prior to the advent of modern policing, where the might of the king and other rulers were at some distance from the people, the maintenance of peace depended upon the dynamics of honour culture, upon the threat of effective vengeance upon those who unsettled the peace or who preyed upon others.

Those who were not able to project a sufficient fear of what would happen to those who threatened them and their family could easily be doomed to be the prey of those mightier than them. Modern nations can still operate to a degree within some sort of an honour culture. There needs to be some projection of might and a deterrent, warning and threat upon any who would think of attacking the nation.

We might also think of the mob boss in a movie. If he does not project some dominance through might, he will be in great danger of being taken out by rivals. In such an honour culture, there can be a great temptation for the powerful man to see every small slight as an excuse for violence.

If he can blow up at the smallest defence, everyone will be extremely deferent to him and fearfully submit to him. One might also think of the quick-tempered father or husband who terrorises his household and dominates them by the fear that he creates. Verse 3 presents the flip side of such an honour culture.

While it is a very good thing for the king to project a warning to adversaries, it is not good to seek a fight at every opportunity. The good man will not needlessly terrorise others through fear. There is a truer honour found in those who can control their temper and having control of their temper can forgive.

The sluggard, once more in verse 4, is described as a character who does not act at the appropriate time and in his folly, having failed to act at the appropriate time, seeks in

vain for the harvest that others are enjoying on account of their faithful and timely sowing. One might perhaps think of this in terms of the different seasons of life. The man who, rather than sowing his wild oats in his earlier years, gave himself to diligence and faithfulness, will enjoy a bountiful harvest while the sluggard comes back empty.

Verse 5 is a difficult one to understand. Bruce Waltke suggests it refers to the wicked and the conniving person whose plans and schemes are hidden that can be wheedled out of him by the wise man. William McCain suggests that it refers to the inner depths of people's thoughts.

This requires a work of eliciting and drawing forth a sort of Socratic process of asking the right questions, bringing that which is inchoate into conscious articulation. The wise man can draw out from the heart and place into words those things that are hidden otherwise. Michael Fox suggests that the point is not that it is difficult to obtain, that these things are secret or profound, but rather that the water of the heart is abundant.

The wise man is the person who draws wisdom out of himself and others by diligently attending to counsel and by taking counsel in his own heart. At various points in Proverbs, we have seen the fickleness of many proclaimed friends. Verse 6 describes the hypocrisy of many who proclaim loudly their faithfulness, but when the time comes are nowhere to be found.

Much as the young man faces the challenge of finding a wise and a good wife, he faces the challenge of identifying faithful friends. Blessing passes down through generations. The righteous, faithful and wise man sets up his children to succeed, whereas the children of the fool, even if they turn out to be wise themselves, will face a significant struggle in overcoming the legacy of their parents.

Verse 8 returns to the theme of verse 2, the power of the king over the people of the land. Here it is described as the judgment that he brings, dividing people into wheat and chaff. The king winnows, effecting this separation by means of his eyes of judgment.

Verse 9 makes plain the fact that no one is without sin. The more closely we examine our own hearts, the more apparent it becomes that they are stained with iniquity and rebellion. Warnings against unequal balances are found at various points in Scripture.

Deuteronomy chapter 25, verses 13 to 16. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small. A full and fair wage you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you.

For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God. Verse 10 expresses this principle succinctly. Our Lord teaches that by their fruit you will know them, and even a child is able to reveal his character if you attend to his

actions.

We can often focus upon people's character being revealed through the things that they say about themselves, but every person can say good things about themselves. What truly reveals character is action. If you want to consider your own character, if you want to consider someone else's character, pay close attention to actions and to their fruit.

Attentiveness and perception are a gift of the Lord. People can see and hear without truly perceiving. The true opening of eyes is a gift of the Lord.

And opposed to this is the love of sleep. The slugger does not want to exert himself. In his failure to exert himself, to use his senses and his faculties to their full extent, he ends up coming into poverty.

The person, however, who opens his eyes by avoiding too much sleep, but also by training and exercising his eyes in attentiveness and in judgment, will find that he prospers. The Proverbs in verses 14 to 17 mostly concern economic affairs. The first, the hypocrisy of the buyer, who will lie concerning the value of an item, but then boast afterwards.

The second, the true value to be found in the lips of a wise man. The third, the danger of entering into a position of being security for another. And then the fourth, the futility and foolishness of ill-gotten wealth.

The description of the bread gained by deceit here should remind us of the woman Folly's invitation in chapter 9, verse 17. Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. Proverbs chapter 15, verse 22 declared, Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed.

Verses 18 and 19 are both speaking in their way to the question of counsel. The king is responsible to make the most momentous plans. He is not the universal expert.

Rather, he must be gifted in the testing of different voices of wisdom, weighing them up, perceiving their strengths and their weaknesses, placing them in conversation with other positions, and through all of this, to arrive at wise, prudent action, having deliberated carefully. To rule well, he must seek out many counsellors and know where they may assist him. However, we face the danger of including the wrong people in our counsel.

The person who goes around revealing secrets and slandering others is not a person into whose counsel you should enter, nor should you allow them into yours. The fifth commandment states, Honour your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God has given you. Verses 20 and 21 concern judgments upon those who fail to honour their father and mother.

Exodus chapter 21, verse 17 says that whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death, whether judgment comes by such human punishment, or by other means, the person who curses his father or mother, who despises his parents, will find that his light is put out. The lamp here probably refers to his own posterity. If you fail to honour your father or mother, how do you expect your children to honour you? A related point is in verse 21, presumably referring to the person who wants to gain the inheritance very quickly, who wants to snatch it from his parents, without actually receiving it appropriately, at the proper time, and over time.

This might be related to the proverb of chapter 19, verse 26, he who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach. When you see the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering, it can be difficult to have confidence in the Lord's moral governance, particularly if you feel that you have been wronged. In such situations you might want to take matters into your own hands.

The warning of verse 22 comes with a charge to be confident in the Lord in such situations. Here we should consider the teaching of places like Romans chapter 12, verses 19-21. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. The providence in the moral governance of the Lord is also a subject of verse 24. A man's heart may have its plans, but the Lord ultimately directs his steps.

When we look back at our lives, how much have we actually planned? So many of the critical events of our lives, the events that have determined the course that our lives have taken thereafter, are things that we could never have foreseen, nor have controlled. Ultimately these things come from the Lord. He is sovereign over all of our steps, and so we should commit our ways to Him.

Knowing that we cannot truly understand our way, He is the one to whom we must look for guidance and protection. Our inability to understand or to control our way, should also lead to circumspection and caution when we make commitments concerning the future. Here the warning is against making rash vows.

We can see a similar warning in Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 21-23. If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.

You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to

the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth. The testing of people by the king and by the Lord is the subject of the verses that follow. Earlier in the chapter, in verse 8, we read, A king who sits on the throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes.

This process of winnowing the wicked, of separating them from the wheat of the righteous like chaff, might remind us of Psalm 1, where the wicked are compared to chaff that the wind blows away. Here there is also a wheel involved, which is almost certainly not an instrument of torture in the context, but an instrument to assist the winnowing, which we see also in Isaiah chapter 28, verse 27. If the wise king divides the righteous from the wicked, the Lord's searching is far more intimate and intensive.

Some have seen verse 27 as referring to the man's own spirit searching out his inner self, that the Lord searches him out by such self-examination. Michael Fox challenges this reading, pointing out that it is not the soul that is doing this, but the breath. The breath is the lamp of the Lord, and the Lord is the one that is searching out.

Every place that the breath, the animating principle of life, goes within a human being, the Lord is searching out by the light of that spirit. The point is that every single aspect of our lives come under the Lord's sight. Nothing that we do is hidden from Him.

The righteous Davidic king is the son of the Lord. He expresses the Lord's character to his people, and this is seen particularly in steadfast love and faithfulness. The king is kind and loyal to his people, and his commitment to them is the means by which his own throne is established.

A king who oppresses and shows no covenant faithfulness to his people will have a very uncertain rule. As modern persons, we tend to think of society as formed of lots of individuals, who have various differences, but those differences do not make a difference. In scripture, however, a lot of emphasis is placed upon the differences between different groups of people, between the young and the old, between men and women, between rulers and their subjects, and with many other people in various stations of life.

A good society is one in which every member rises to their full stature, and expresses their gifts and their strengths to the service of all. Verse 29 expresses something of this principle. The glory of young men is their strength.

The strength of a society more generally is primarily seen in their young men. A good society honors the strength of young men and employs it for the benefit of all, ensuring that young men do not use their strength in a cruel or oppressive fashion, nor that young men in their strength are just seen as disposable. Old men should also be honored for their part.

They should be honored for their wisdom. They should not merely be regarded as relics of some past to be swept away. Rather, their particular insight should be attended to.

The young men should learn from the old men and attend to their counsel, as they exercise their strength with the direction and the guidance of the older men. They will be much more effective and also more beneficial for the rest of society. Likewise, it's the duty of the older men to honor the younger men and to build them up, not just to exploit the strength of the younger men for their own power.

In a society of mutual honor between the generations, between parents and children, between husband and wife, between the sexes more generally, all should be built up. The strengths of one party are not used purely for their selfish interests, but for the benefit and empowering of all. The chapter ends with a proverb declaring the importance of correction.

Corporal punishment is not the first resource, but properly applied it can be that thing that holds someone back from going all the way into folly. The person who's lost sensitivity to wisdom can be startled into awareness by corporal punishment. A question to consider.

Within this chapter there is a lot of teaching concerning the task and the wisdom of the king. Considering the character of King David, where in his life can we see these principles exemplified in both their positive and their negative aspects? Elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs, the king is described as giving life-giving dew to the land. Here his heart is described as like a stream of water held in the hands of the Lord, who moves it wherever he will.

The king's heart, which ideally should irrigate the land with justice, is under the rule of the Lord. Such kingship is described in Isaiah 32, verses 1-2. The Lord's mastery of the heart of the king is also seen in the Book of Exodus, as the Lord strengthens and hardens the heart of Pharaoh.

The Lord's knowledge of and mastery of the heart is also seen in verse 2. We can easily delude ourselves about the true intents of our heart, but we cannot deceive the Lord. The Lord weighs and understands our hearts. He can perceive our true motivations and the true moral character that we have.

The invalidation of sacrifice and prayer and other acts of worship, by unrighteousness or injustice, is a common theme within the New Testament and the Old. What the Lord really desires is not the ritual sacrifices, so much as the hearts of his people and their obedience. This principle can be seen in the story of King Saul in 1 Samuel 15, verse 22.

And Samuel said, Hosea 6, verse 6, is one of the verses that Jesus quotes on a few occasions in his ministry. Proverbs 15, verse 8, also expresses a similar principle. A

person's lamp can be a way of describing the principle by which they act.

Proverbs 6, verse 23, For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life. In verse 4, however, we see that haughty eyes and a proud heart are the lamps of the wicked. These lamps are themselves sin, and they lead the person to sin and destruction.

It is not just sinful actions that are sinful, but also our faculties and desires that are bent towards sin are themselves sinful. The book of Proverbs warns on a number of occasions against easy wealth, against get-rich-quick plans. Proverbs 28, verse 20, A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished.

This is a foolish way to seek wealth. A man who is diligent will build up lasting wealth, but the person who is trying to avoid difficult labour and get rich quick will end up coming to poverty. He has rejected the principle by which true and lasting wealth is made and maintained.

This warning against those who are hasty in trying to get wealth is followed by a warning against wickedness in the gaining of wealth. The person who employs deceit in pursuit of riches. Such achievement of wealth is described as like a vapour.

It is insubstantial and short-lasting. It will soon evaporate in the heat of the sun. This warning against deceit is followed by another warning against the way of wickedness, a warning against violence.

The principle here is similar to that expressed by our Lord. He who lives by the sword will die by the sword. The wicked will themselves be swept away by the violence that they initiate.

Michael Fox suggests that we should read verse 8 as A man's behaviour may be tortuous, even while his deeds are pure and upright. Such a proverb would be a warning against judging too hastily. That way of a man that seems strange and unfamiliar may not in fact be wrong.

This however seems unpersuasive as a reading to me. It is far more likely, I think, to be a straightforward contrast between the way of the wicked and the guilty and the way of the pure. Verse 9, along with verse 19, warn against the misery of living with a quarrelsome wife.

Such warnings are found elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs. In verse 19 of this chapter, it is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman. In chapter 19 verse 13, a foolish son is a ruin to his father and a wife's quarrelling is a continual dripping of rain.

The warning concerns a quarrelsome wife, in part because the Book of Proverbs is

overwhelmingly written to young men. Perhaps the purpose of the proverb is to provide a warning about the potential miseries of an imprudent marriage. A young man led astray by his desires may not give careful thought to the consequences of a bad choice in a marriage partner.

Yet he would be far better off not being married than being married to such a woman. Many lonely and unmarried young men have sought to enter into a marriage hastily in order to escape such loneliness. But the loneliness of the unmarried may be nothing when compared to the loneliness of those in an unhappy marriage.

There are few things more miserable than a home filled with contention. And perhaps there is no person better able to sow misery and bitterness throughout the whole of the household than a quarrelsome wife. The converse of this truth is incredibly important for Proverbs 2, as we see in the final chapter.

A faithful and loving wife is the crown of her husband and can overwhelmingly determine the tenor of an entire household by her presence. The wicked man has a deep desire for evil. He is merciless.

He does not want to forgive, but rather wants to see the downfall of his neighbor. By contrast, of course, the righteous wants reconciliation. He desires restoration of the sinner.

He is ready to forgive, and he wants to repair the breaches and those things that are broken. The simple person, the person who has yet uninstructed and has not learned the path of wisdom, can gain wisdom through moral exemplars. He can learn from the punishment of the scoffer the connection between deeds and consequences.

He can also learn from the company of the wise. The identity of the righteous one in verse 12 is a matter of debate. Many take it to refer to God.

God is the one who brings ruin upon people. However, it could also be a reference to the righteous man. Such a person observes the house of the wicked, and in his imagination he casts the house down, realizing that it is not going to last.

Alternatively, perhaps he casts it down with a word of judgment declared against it. For many commentators, however, this seems too much of a stretch, and the righteous one is taken to refer to God. One could see a symmetry between our relationship to the poor and God's relationship to us.

The poor depend upon others, upon other people acting on their behalf and showing compassion upon them. We depend, in a similar manner, upon the Lord. If we show no love and concern and compassion for the poor, why should we expect the Lord to show such things towards us? This is related to a principle that we encounter on a number of occasions in Scripture.

There must be a symmetry between the way that we act to others and the way that God has acted towards us, and indeed, it is as we act in that way towards others that we enjoy the benefits of what God has done towards us. If we do not forgive, for instance, we will not be forgiven. The character of the gift or the bribe that is mentioned in verse 14 has led to diverse readings among commentators.

Bruce Waltke suggests that it is the bribe that turns away righteous punishment. It is an evil attempt to pervert justice. William McCain suggests that rather it is the discreetly given gift designed to improve communication between two parties, to assuage anger.

One might think of the way that Abigail or Jacob use great gifts to assuage the anger of people coming to attack them. Fox suggests the third possibility. The anger is that of the Lord, and the gift that is given in secret is the gift given to the poor.

It should be read with the verse that precedes it. As someone performs his charity in secret, neither boasting in his own generosity nor causing the poor to lose face, the Lord's anger will not be kindled against him. When justice is done in a society, whether by the legal authorities or by the Lord himself, there are contrasting results.

The righteous are heartened, but the evil-doers are thrown into terror. It is important that justice be seen to be done. The manifest performance or occurrence of justice gives a signal to all within a society.

It is an encouragement to righteousness and dissuasion from injustice. The fate of wicked people is the subject of verses 16 to 18. The person who willingly leaves the way of righteousness and wisdom will end up in the realm of the dead.

The person who is given over to pleasures will find that he becomes poor. And the wicked person is dispensable for society. When destruction comes, he will be a ransom for the righteous.

He will take the place of the upright in the destruction. We might recall Abraham interceding for Sodom in Genesis chapter 18. The Lord is deeply concerned that the righteous be preserved, but the wicked by their wickedness have made themselves worthless and will perish.

This should be a very sobering thought. John Ruskin, a famous Victorian philosopher and art critic, wrote in a way that well describes something of the principle of verse 20. Hence it follows that if a thing is to be useful, it must be not only of an availing nature, but in availing hands, or in accurate terms, usefulness is value in the hands of the valiant.

He continues, And the valour of its possessor must be estimated together. Whence it appears that many of the persons commonly considered wealthy are in reality no more wealthy than the locks of their own strongboxes are, they being inherently and eternally

incapable of wealth, and operating for the nation in an economic point of view, either as pools of dead water and eddies in a stream, which so long as the stream flows are useless, or serve only to drown people, but may become of importance in a state of stagnation, should the stream dry, or else as dams in a river, of which the ultimate service depends not on the dam, but the miller, or else as mere accidental stays and impediments, acting not as wealth, but, for we ought to have a correspondent term, as ilth, causing various devastation and trouble around them in all directions, or lastly, act not at all, but are merely animated conditions of delay, no use being possible of anything that they have until they are dead. Solomon here makes a similar point.

It's little use to have great value in your house if you don't have the wisdom and the prudence with which to use it. The foolish person can only consume wealth, he cannot create it. It is much preferable for wealth to be in the hands of people who can use it productively, and use it for the benefit of many, than for it to be in the hands of fools and sluggards who will squander or destroy it.

Aiming for the right things is the subject of verse 21. Pursuing righteousness and kindness will lead you to find life and honour. Those persons, however, who seek to avoid the pursuit of righteousness and kindness, and get life and honour immediately, end up finding neither.

The effectiveness and the power of wisdom is manifest in its use in strategy and elsewhere. The wise man with his stratagems can overcome the mighty city, a city which could not be defeated by means of great brute force alone. Self-control continues to be central to the task of wisdom.

Keeping your mouth and your tongue is a means to keep yourself out of trouble. The fool, by contrast, speaks in a way that creates a rod for his own back. Verse 24 describes a recognisable character, the scoffer who is arrogant and haughty, and speaks with raging pride.

One of the great tasks of wisdom is to recognise types of persons, to be able to identify the scoffer, to see the more subtle forms of the sluggard, and to recognise a fool, even when he has a number of university degrees. The sluggard is the subject of verses 25-26. He is eaten away by his desire that is unsatisfied, because he has not worked to meet it.

While the sluggard is marked by a continual unsatisfied desire, the righteous person can give freely and generously. Earlier in this chapter, in verse 3, we saw the importance of righteousness and justice over the mere performance of ritual sacrifice. Verse 27 takes this point even further.

The sacrifice of the wicked has already been shown to be an abomination. This abomination, however, is aggravated when the sacrifice is offered for some ulterior

motive, as a mask for some sin, or an occasion for injustice, or a way of excusing some sin that the wicked person intends. In verse 28, we find ourselves in the conflict of the law court.

There is a false witness, who will ultimately be found out. But the person who listens will endure. Or perhaps the meaning here is that he will be victorious.

The person, maybe, who listens carefully to the words of the false witness will be able to catch him out in his falsehood. Or perhaps the point is that the faithful witness is one who pays close attention. He cares about the truth of the matter, and as a result, delivers careful and accurate testimony that will enable him to prevail.

The connection of words with hearing here is interesting. The person who listens carefully, who has practiced the art of attentiveness, will be the one whose speech is accurate and sound. If the listening of the man in the second verset of verse 28 is to the false witness, perhaps it connects with verse 29.

The wicked man puts on a brazen face, but the upright, who is attentive, perceives the way of the wicked man. The chapter ends on a similar note to that which it began. It began with the Lord's control of the heart of the king, like streams of water, and with the Lord's weighing of the heart.

It ends with two other references to the Lord, to the way that the Lord's counsel and plan will prevail, that there is no scheme that could withstand him, and to the fact that whatever preparation is made for the day of battle, the ultimate outcome is from the Lord. Psalm 20, verse 7. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. The outcome of events ultimately lies with Him.

A question to consider. This chapter says a lot about the relationship between wealth and its possessors, or between wealth and the way it has been obtained. What are some of the mechanisms by which the principles described in this chapter in this regard can be seen to hold in the world around us? Proverbs chapter 22 begins by teaching us that a good reputation is far more valuable than great wealth.

Favor with the Lord and with one's fellow man is to be preferred over great riches. Although there may be great societal divides and economic disparities between the rich and the poor, when it comes down to it, they are both created by the Lord. There is a fundamental equality in the biblical teaching here.

Oliver O'Donovan writes, and more recently, racism, to take two examples that commended themselves ecumenically to all Christian consciences. Equality is something that is true about human beings. The language of ideals confuses the most important distinction between equality, as the reality of the relation between any two humans created in the image of God, and equal treatment, as the norm of behavior that gives

some practical expression to this reality.

It is a demand of faith that we should lay hold and act upon the truth of human equality. It is in fact an aspect of the belief that God created the human race, and without the one belief, the other must be undermined. But it is a truth beneath the surface, at the metaphysical level, a truth that has to be seen through to, past the differentiated and complexified structures of human society.

Human society does not, and cannot yield us, a clear and unhindered view of our equality. To insist that it shall do so, is to want to live metaphysically, that is, to confuse the foundations with the superstructure of human existence, and the result of that is to annul the created forms in which the elaboration of human society is possible. The fate of all revolutionary equalization is to make human life unlivable.

Proverbs is not at this point teaching such equalization, rather it is reminding us of that basic fact of creation, the fact that we must take by faith that whatever social and economic disparities may suggest, all persons are equally creatures of God, and must be treated with dignity accordingly. The trouble or danger referred to in verse 3 may be a quarrel. The person who is simple runs straight into quarrels and gets himself enmeshed and entangled in them.

The wise man, by contrast, knows better than to get himself tangled up in other people's affairs. He keeps his distance. Humility and the fear of the Lord have been connected in the Book of Proverbs on several occasions.

Here it is possible that the reward for humility is the fear of the Lord, and from that we have the reward of riches and honour and life. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the person who has humility is aptly disposed to receive this. Wisdom herself rewards those who find her.

Riches and honour are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness, in Proverbs 8, verse 18, and in verse 35 of that chapter, for whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord. The crooked, the sluggard, the fool, and other such characters often believe that they are making the way easier by the way that they sin. However, here we see once more that the way of the crooked is characterized by difficulty and pain and danger.

The thorns on the way of the crooked are difficult and painful. The snares may be fatal dangers. The crooked here is contrasted with the person who guards his soul, who will keep very far from such ways.

Raising children is a common theme in the Book of Proverbs, and here again we are taught the duty of parents to set the pattern for their children. Once their children have been set in the right path, they will tend to continue in it throughout their lives. Just as

the rich man can rule over the poor man, the person who borrows can be the slave of the lender, either by virtue of the demand that the lender has upon him, or perhaps in the danger of his being reduced to actual slavery.

What a man sows, he will also reap. Themes of sowing and reaping are common in the wisdom literature. They give a sense of the fruits of particular actions, the seasonality of activity, the fact that you need to act at particular times if you are going to be effective, and the fact that failures in the past can have great repercussions for the future.

Human life is also characterized by seasons of sowing and reaping. Various seasons of our lives are defined primarily by sowing, by actions whose consequences are many years in the future. There are however other seasons of life where we are primarily harvesting, where we are reaping the consequences of what we have done in the past, for good or for ill.

The person in verse 8 is someone who has sowed injustice, and what he has sown he will receive back himself, and at that point the rod of his fury, the flail by which someone might thresh grain, will fail him. He won't be able to protect himself from the consequences of his actions. The Lord is the patron of the poor.

In Proverbs 19, verse 17 we read, Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed. Here again we are reminded that the person who is generous will receive back bountifully from the Lord. The Lord is no one's debtor.

John Wesley was once asked if a particular campaign of preaching had produced many additions to the Church. His response was a surprising one. No, but there were some blessed subtractions.

The presence of certain discontents within a community can affect everyone. Remove those discontents, and quarrelling and abuse and all these other problems will cease. In Scripture there are a number of occasions where people are told to purge out certain people from a community that will corrupt it or lead it into idolatry or sin.

We see this in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, where the sinful man has to be purged out like the old leaven. Recognising the scoffers in a community and dealing with them effectively is one of the means by which a community can be built up. The king is on the lookout for faithful servants.

Proverbs chapter 16, verse 13, Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right. The person whose heart is pure and who speaks with wisdom and grace is exactly the sort of person that the king wants to have in his service. The friend of the king here may not just be a particular companion of the king, but rather a more official counsellor.

The Lord makes sure that the words of knowledge do not fall to the ground, whereas he

will overthrow the words of traitors. Once again we should remember that what Proverbs is teaching is not just about the natural dynamics of the world, but about the way that the Lord is involved in moral governance of his creation. It is he who ultimately secures the victory of the wise.

The sluggard is someone who gives excuses in order to avoid work and exertion. Hear a claim that there is a lion outside in the street. The sluggard is often held up as a figure of ridicule in the book of Proverbs.

We find a similar verse later on in chapter 26, verse 13. The sluggard says, There is a lion in the road, there is a lion in the streets. His folly is obvious, and mockery of him may be one means of rousing him to his senses.

In verse 14 the mouth of the forbidden woman is described as a deep pit. Earlier on in chapter 7, verse 27, we are told that the way of the adulterous woman led down to death. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death.

Later on in chapter 23, verse 27, we are told that the prostitute herself is a deep pit. For a prostitute is a deep pit, an adulteress is a narrow well. Here, however, it is the mouth of the forbidden woman that is the deep pit.

Earlier in the book, in the description of such women, their mouths and their speech were the primary means by which victims were hooked. Understood in this way, the speech of the seductress is the great pit into which people are in danger of falling. The second verset of this proverb, he with whom the Lord is angry will fall into it, is important to consider.

The Lord is the one who condemns such people to their doom. He is the one who exposes them to the danger. In Ezekiel chapter 3, verse 20, Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die.

While the Lord protects the righteous, he ensnares the wicked. He gives them the rope with which they will hang themselves. As Christians, we pray, lead us not into temptation.

Knowing our own weakness and the power that sin still has within us, we seek the protection of the Lord from such snares. Children left to their own devices will not end up walking in the path of wisdom. They are attracted to folly from the outset.

This inclination needs to be trained out of them, and careful discipline, including corporal punishment, is a means by which this can be achieved. Once again, the importance of such punishment is to train the child, not as a form of parental vengeance or a way of terrorizing children into submission. Good discipline should yield understanding and should not provoke children to wrath.

The interpretation of verse 16 is difficult. Michael Fox suggests that it could be rendered, There is one who oppresses a poor man, yet he ends up giving him more. There is one who gives to a rich man, yet he ends up in need.

If this is an accurate rendering, then it's speaking about the reversals that can occur, where the Lord can turn the tables upon oppressors and leave them in poverty, while the poor they once oppressed are raised up. In verse 17 we arrive at a new section of the Book of Proverbs, and also at quite a surprise. The words of the wise here seem to be using as their background an Egyptian pagan text, the Instructions of Amenemope, This Egyptian text, which evidence suggests precedes the biblical text of Proverbs, is extensively employed and reworked.

The Egyptian text is not just lifted here, it's appropriated and refashioned by a faithful Israelite writer. The wisdom literature more generally arises from reflection upon the world, from learning about the patterns of life with an insight that's been given by God. It relies in large part upon there being patterns within reality that have been set up by the Creator.

Those who have been granted insight by God, and those who have reflected upon the law of the Lord, will be best equipped to perceive and to understand these patterns. Wisdom is also something that is cosmopolitan. You do not have to have received special revelation to be able to perceive some of these patterns in reality.

This is what is spoken of often when people talk about natural law. Those with an instinctive grasp of this sort of natural law are able to practice it within the practical reason of living well. Wisdom, or the art of living well, is something that can be brought to greater articulation by some, but for many it is found primarily in sound patterns of life.

And much reflection concerning such patterns of life had occurred in pagan nations. In the story of King Solomon we see the cultural interchange that occurred through his wisdom. We also see that his wisdom is compared to the wisdom of men of the East.

He is not the only person engaging in such exploration of the world in his time. In the scriptural reworking of this pagan Egyptian text, we're seeing something of the way in which pagan wisdom can be appropriated by the people of God. The early church would later learn from the wisdom of Athens.

The Apostle Paul himself quotes pagan poets in the book of Acts, and also in some of his epistles. The faithful people of God do not have a monopoly on truth. There is much truth to be discovered outside of the pages of scripture, and outside of the company of the faithful.

While we must be careful in the way that we appropriate these things, here and

elsewhere we have biblical precedent, not just from learning from creation apart from special divine revelation, but also for going to pagans and non-Christians to see what we can learn from them. The quest for truth is cosmopolitan. The quest for truth is the great quest that will traverse many different societies and cultures.

It brings people together as fellow travellers from many different times, from many different places, and of many different walks of life and backgrounds. Many Christians in recent years have tried to establish a Christian worldview, a sort of airtight Christian system of thought, hermetically sealed from all other belief systems and philosophies. Yet here and elsewhere I believe that the biblical text would actually propel us into receptive engagement and exchange with different cultures and belief systems, challenging us to discover those elements of truth that exist within different traditions of thought, and testing everything by the standard of the word of God, incorporating what we can.

The connection that biblical scholars have drawn between this part of Proverbs and Amenemope is witnessed in something like verse 20, which in many translations reads, The word here translated thirty has also in older translations been translated as ancient or as noble, or in the Septuagint as three. The fact that many translations now go for thirty is founded upon the connection that biblical scholars have seen between it and Amenemope, that has thirty chapters of teaching. Verse 20 reads, Have I not written for you thirty sayings of counsel and knowledge? Amenemope writes, Look to these thirty chapters.

They inform, they educate. Bruce Waltke and others have tried to break down the thirty different sayings of this section, but their precise divisions and enumeration is not easy to determine. Identifying some particular affinities between this chapter and parts of Amenemope, we can see, for instance in verses 17-18 compared with Amenemope, Give thine ear and hear what I say, and apply thine heart to apprehend.

It is good for thee to place them in thine heart. Let them rest in the casket of thy belly. They may act as a peg upon thy tongue.

With verse 22, Beware of robbing the poor and oppressing the afflicted. Of verses 24 and 25, Associate not with a passionate man, nor reproach him for conversation. Leap not to cleave to such an one, that terror carry thee not away.

In verse 29, A scribe who is skillful in his business findeth worthy to be a courtier. In verses 22 and 23, Once again we see the Lord as the guardian and the protector and the guarantor of the poor. The Lord cares for the weak, the oppressed and the afflicted, and He will act against all who mistreat them.

The danger of bad company corrupting good habits is seen in verses 24-25. The character of a man who is given to anger can be contagious. If you hang around with

such a person, you can become an angry person yourself, and having gained their vice, you risk suffering its bitter consequences.

Once again we have a warning against putting up security for others. Chapter 6 verses 1-5 provide the most extensive warning along this line. Verse 28 warns against moving the ancient landmark.

A very similar verse is found in chapter 23 verse 10, just a few verses later. Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless. Cnut Haim observes that this is something that is repeated also in the text of Amenemope.

The repetition that we see here in Proverbs seems to be based in part upon a repetition within the source text of Amenemope. The concern here is particularly that of protecting the widows and the fatherless and other vulnerable figures from having their property taken from them by the rich oppressor. A society that did not honour the boundaries of property would swiftly become predatory.

A great deal of wisdom consists in being attentive to the world and the people around you. The final proverb of this chapter encourages people to be alert to those people who are competent and gifted in their orbit, to mark those people, and see where they end up. People of great gifts will almost invariably rise up.

If you see a very skilful person, he is most likely destined to be elevated. A question to consider. Where else in Scripture might we find examples of the cosmopolitan character of wisdom? 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. 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. Moth and rust 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 Amenemope. However, whereas the image that is used in Amenemope 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.

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. 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 At this point the focus is more explicitly upon those who are fatherless, persons who are vulnerable to exploitation, who lack the defense that a father or husband would give. The warning here goes back to places like Deuteronomy chapter 19 verse 14.

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.

Verses 13-14 bring another encouragement to disciplined 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 evil doers, be not envious of wrong doers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. 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 to 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. 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 honoring of father and mother is a great pillar of the house of wisdom.

In this honoring, the son looks back to his origins. He recognizes that he has come from

his mother and father. It is also a lifelong honoring.

The son must continue to honor his father and mother, even when they are old, when their mental and physical faculties might start to fail them. This honoring 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. The beginning of wisdom is this.

Get wisdom and whatever you get, get insight. Having already warned the son against the company of gluttons and drunkards in verses 19 to 21, 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. May 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? Michael Fox also raises the possibility that the deep pit and the narrow well may also be a euphemistic way of speaking of the woman's sexual organs.

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. 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 the 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? 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.

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 be aware 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. And in Psalm 73 verses 1-5.

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.

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. 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 in 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.

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 8-9 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.

In chapter 16 verse 24 we read, 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 a 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.

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 19-20 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.

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 22-28. Political authority and divine authority are connected in various ways. Scripture commonly warns against the danger of partiality in judgement.

Exodus 23-2-3 Deuteronomy 1-17 Deuteronomy 16-19 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 dishonour 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 honour and respect.

In verse 26 we are shown that true honour and respect is seen in speaking with candour to people. The difficult word, the challenging rebuke, can often be rejected by people. They can feel that it is an attack.

But a friend that speaks with candour 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 neighbour is the subject of verses 28-29.

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 6, verses 9-11 read, How long will you lie there, O sluggard? 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? Proverbs chapter 25 begins a new section of the book of Proverbs. It's a compilation of a number of the Proverbs of Solomon that were brought together in the time of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was king of Judah from around 728 to 687 BC.

He was co-regent with Manasseh for the latter decade or so of his reign. The Proverbs in this section, from chapter 25 to 29, are more thematic in their ordering, especially in chapters 25 and 26. There are a lot of metaphor and simile Proverbs, far more than elsewhere.

The section is introduced in a way that makes reference to a previous section of Solomonic Proverbs. These also are Proverbs of Solomon. King Hezekiah's men were presumably transcribing Proverbs from various sources, editing them and collating them within a single text.

This work may have been undertaken to consolidate the wisdom and the tradition of the nation. In 1 Kings chapter 4 verses 29 to 34, the wisdom of Solomon and his forming of Proverbs is described. And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.

But he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezraite, and Heman, Calchul, and Dada, the sons of Mahal, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke three thousand Proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon, to the hyssop that grows out of the wall.

He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. Verses 2 to 7 of this section particularly focus upon the figure of the king.

Verse 2 might remind us of Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 29. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. The Lord's glory is seen in the concealed things, the mysteries of the creation that he has formed, the mysteries of his purposes.

The glory of kings is seen in the way that they search things out within their kingdom, the ways that with their wisdom they disclose and speak to the affairs of the nation. The

heart of the king himself is mysterious to the people of the land. While the king investigates and discloses the hearts of others, he himself is inscrutable.

This associates the king with the Lord in various ways. But we should recall Proverbs chapter 21 verse 1. Although the king's heart is inscrutable to the people of the land, the king's heart is like streams of water in the hand of the Lord. He can turn the king's heart wherever he wills.

The king's task is to forge a nation, and to do this he needs to be working with the right material. One of his tasks is to remove the wicked from his presence, an act compared to taking the dross away from silver. A king who surrounds himself with the wrong people will be greatly weakened.

He will not have an effective reign. One of the problems at the end of King David's reign was the influence of people like Joab in his court. As long as he had the dross like Joab, he would not be able to rule effectively.

And one of the initial tasks of Solomon upon coming to the throne was to purge out certain people from the old regime and to establish a new righteous one in its place. On a somewhat analogous level, if you want to form a good society, you need to consider the membership of the core group incredibly carefully. From the king's determining the members of his regime in verses 4 and 5, the question of advancement in the court is viewed from the other perspective in verses 6 and 7. Here the aspiring young person is taught to keep his ambitions in check.

If he keeps pushing himself forward above his proper station, he will be called to go down lower and will be humbled as a result. However, if he is modest in his approach, he may well find himself called up higher, granting him honour and a new standing. Jesus gave a parable very similar to this in Luke chapter 14 verses 7 to 11.

Now he told a parable to those who were invited when he noticed how they chose the places of honour, saying to them, When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honour, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by them. And he who invited you both will come and say to you, Give your place to this person, and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, Friend, move up higher, then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at table with you.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. The verses that follow encourage prudence and discretion in the way that quarrels and disputes are handled. We are warned about being litigious or being precipitous in bringing forth complaints to court, escalating matters in such a fashion you may find yourself losing costly legal battles.

Far better to address the matter privately and quietly if at all possible. Don't go around spreading the word of your dispute. Keep the matter private if you can.

You should also beware of being used in such a manner, with others divulging their disputes to you. If you pass on such reports, you will end up being regarded as disloyal and untrustworthy. Jesus also teaches concerning these matters in the Gospel.

Matthew 5, 25-26 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. Matthew 18, 15-17 If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The principles here can be applied more broadly. We should always be mindful of ways to avoid escalation of conflict. This involves dealing with many matters privately if possible.

It involves doing our best to leave the door open for reconciliation. Our concern should always be to de-escalate. We need to be careful not to act in a manner that will cause people to dig in their heels.

Verses 11-15 speak about the character and the power of words. One of the things that the Proverbs really accentuate is the importance of the right words at the right time. Words ought to be delivered in season by the man of wise speech to the man of the listening ear.

This is expressed in verse 11 with the image of a beautiful piece of jewellery, golden apples set in a beautiful piece of silver. And here the piece of silver is compared to the ear that hears and the apples of gold to the words that are spoken. The need for a piece of jewellery to have the right setting is witnessed in the unfitting setting of the gold ring in the pig's snout in chapter 11 verse 22.

Here however the setting is fitting for the word that is received. The ear is a common place for jewellery and in verse 12 the reproving word is described as if it were a piece of jewellery that could be set in the ear. If the ear will receive it, the word will adorn it.

It would be strange indeed to have snow at the time of harvest in May and June. Indeed it might even have been disastrous. What is described in verse 13 is most likely a situation where people in the heat of the day, in the middle of their labours, would long for the refreshing coolness of the snow.

If one were to experience the refreshing coolness of the snow at that time, it would be similar to a faithful messenger. A faithful messenger extends the capacities of the one who sends him. He brings relief from fears and anxieties.

Proverbs chapter 13 verse 17 A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a faithful envoy brings healing. Empty boasts and promises are the subject of verse 14. Clouds driven by the wind promise the possibility of rain, and so does a man who boasts of a gift.

However, exciting hopes only to dash them is far worse than never arousing those hopes to begin with. If verses 11 and 12 spoke of the fittingness of wise words, verse 15 speaks of the power of wise words. A person who speaks with patience and care, who speaks with gentleness, can be far more effective in his speech than the physical force of breaking a bone could be.

Elsewhere in the book of Proverbs, the power and the might of wisdom has been discussed. Wisdom isn't merely beautiful, it is strong and effective. It is possible to have too much of a good thing, and supposing for the sake of argument that your company is a good thing, your friends can have too much of it.

Far better to leave well before they tire of you, and to desire your return, than to linger around and have them desiring your departure. Verses 18-20 give us some examples of men who are deeply troublesome to their neighbours. The false witness is described as like a weapon.

The treacherous man is compared to a broken tooth or a foot that slips. You rely upon your feet and you rely upon your teeth, and when they fail you, it causes you deep discomfort and can be a source of insecurity. So it is with someone whose friendship is only hypocritical.

A good friend will be attentive to his friend's spirit, yet a supposed friend who sings songs to a friend who is struggling with a heavy heart merely exacerbates his distress. This is like placing vinegar on soda, which causes it to aggressively fizz up. Proverbs has on several occasions warned us against envy, vengeance and schadenfreude.

Verses 21 and 22 provide us with further teaching in this vein. This teaching is also taken up in Romans chapter 12. Rather than being vindictive and seeking to avenge yourself upon your enemy, when you see your enemy in distress, take pity upon them and seek to ameliorate their situation.

Various suggested interpretations have been put forward for the burning coals of verse 22. While some have suggested that they refer to the punishment that the Lord will bring upon that person, it seems more likely that the burning pangs of shame may be in view here. Such gracious action towards your enemy may provoke him to remorse and later repentance.

There are certain people who unerringly produce discord within community. The gossip or the slanderer is a great example of this. By their simple activity of whispering in people's ears, they have a community-wide effect, sowing anger all around them.

Verse 24 is a repetition of chapter 21 verse 9. It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. Like the gossip can produce conflict throughout their community, so the quarrelsome wife can make her entire household miserable. As the wife holds one of the greatest powers for producing harmony and unity, so she is in the most powerful position to produce disharmony and conflict.

Like verse 13 compared the faithful messenger to the cold of snow in the harvest, so verse 25 compares good news from a far country to cold water received by a thirsty soul. From the pure, cool water of verse 25, however, we move to verse 26 with a muddied spring or polluted fountain. A faithful righteous man who guards the boundaries, who stands up to error and wickedness, and does not give in or compromise, can be a source of encouragement and security to all around him.

But if such a man gives way or compromises, everyone is greatly weakened and disheartened. The righteous man is like the spring or fountain from which other people can drink. He provides life to those around him, and he does so by maintaining purity.

If he fails to maintain such purity, if he fails to stand up to and oppose the wicked, he ends up being worthless to everyone. Indeed, he may even become a threat. There are various translations suggested for verse 27.

Bruce Waltke renders it as This would presumably bring us back to verse 2 at the opening of the section. Michael Fox renders it as William McCain points out that whatever we interpret it as, we need to follow the logic of the illustration. Eating honey is a good thing in itself.

The danger is doing it to excess. So whatever is referred to in the second half of the verse must be a good thing that should not be taken to excess. He suggests that it is to be sparing with eulogising words.

Proverbs 16.32 reads Verse 28 expresses this truth in a negative form. Wisdom in large measure is found in learning how to respond rather than react. The walls are those boundaries that differentiate yourself from others.

They are the boundaries that allow you to deliberate rather than merely reacting. They are the boundaries that allow you to maintain your inner composure when everyone else is losing his head. They are also the boundaries that enable you to avoid taking on the character of other people too easily.

A walled city can retain its own character even against those things that are around it.

The city without walls has no way of marking itself out from those things that surround it. The proverb here compares the city with walls to a person with self-control.

Without self-control, you will be controlled by your impulses, by your environment and the forces that are at work within it, by the movements of the masses around you, by whatever passions are in the air. The self-controlled man has an inner core of agency. He can act in a way that is self-determined, not just determined by other factors.

Another way of looking at this, perhaps, is to see that the self-controlled man is a man who truly possesses a heart, a realm within, distinguished from the realm outside, within which he can meditate, deliberate, weigh things, consider words and a fountain from which his actions can spring. A question to consider. Verse 11 compares an ear that listens well to a setting of silver.

What are some of the ways in which we can make our ears a fitting setting for wise words? Proverbs chapter 26 deals with a number of different types of figures. In verses 1 to 12, the fool, quarrelers and mischief makers are the subject of verses 17 to 22. And at the end, we have hypocritical and false friends.

The focus of the opening verses is on the fool, his folly and how to handle him. Michael Fox observes that these verses view the fool chiefly from the angle of suitability or fittingness. The inappropriateness of giving honour to the fool is an especially important point here, and it is mentioned in the verse with which the chapter begins.

Snow and summer is out of keeping with the season. While it could be refreshing, as we see in Proverbs chapter 25 verse 13, here it is the fact that it is out of keeping with the season that is emphasised. Human blessings and curses in scripture are often spoken of as if they had an effective force.

However, verse 2 gives us a possible window into how this effectiveness was perceived. The baseless curse here is described as ineffective. It doesn't land.

A true curse presumably invokes the Lord's righteous judgement upon a person. Where a person is not properly subject to the Lord's curse, no curse will be effective against them. We might think of the story of Balaam and his fruitless attempt to curse Israel in the book of Numbers.

The fool is insensitive to wisdom and is beast-like. Like a brute animal that needs to be driven along by mankind, so the fool needs to be corrected by the rod. Having an untrained and resistant ear, his body must be beaten like that of an animal.

Verses 4 and 5 foreground a feature of Proverbs more generally that they can often seem contradictory. Wisdom is required to interpret and to apply a proverb effectively, and here we have two proverbs that are seemingly directly contradictory, placed in immediate juxtaposition. Clearly the compilers of these proverbs, if not Solomon himself,

want us to reflect upon how they go together.

Various proposals have been given for understanding the relationship between these two proverbs. Some focus chiefly upon the different contexts within which they could be applied, whereas others suggest that some sort of equivocation might be taking place. What is meant by answering a fool according to his folly in the first proverb may not be the same as what it means in the second.

There is a dialectical character to wisdom, where different principles push against each other, and you need to hold these different principles in conversation. People who would absolutize one principle without counterbalancing it by another are always in danger of falling into folly. It can be a very dangerous thing to enter into a quarrel with a fool.

He is far more likely to bring you down to his level than you are to bring him up to yours. Furthermore, to onlookers, you will be associated with him. The people that you choose to dialogue with are often seen to be your counterparts.

It is very easy to cheapen wisdom by bringing it into conversation with fools. We can think of the illustration that our Lord gives of throwing pearls before swine. Or in Proverbs 29, verse 9, if a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet.

Trying to reason with a fool in such a situation merely sets up your wisdom to be drowned out and to be ridiculed. Besides this, by speaking to the fool on his own terms, you risk giving legitimacy to his opinions. The fool isn't motivated by the truth.

He is motivated by the folly in his heart. And the more that you try and reason with him, the harder it will be for people to discern the difference between your sort of speech and his sort of speech, because you're having to deal with him on his own terms. There are, however, considerations on the other side.

A fool who speaks unchecked is in great danger of becoming wise in his own eyes, which is a far more dangerous state. He can be puffed up, thinking that he is wise, because no one has challenged him. In such a situation, it may be important to speak directly to his folly, and to address it forcefully and openly.

Perhaps one of the best ways to do this well is to consider the audience who are listening to you address the fool. The role of the audience may be a critical factor in helping us to understand the counsel that's being given here. In the encounter between the wise man and the fool, the wise man likely has to be very alert to the way that other people view the fool and his engagement with him.

The ideal is to discredit the fool in the presence of the assembly, but not to get entangled in conflict with the fool. Say enough to expose the fool as a fool, but don't try and best him in an argument. He is impervious to reason, and you'll just end up looking

like a fool yourself.

As a modern illustration of this, you might think of the advice given to people online. Don't feed the trolls. There are occasions when the trolls need to be exposed as trolls, but most of the time it's best just to keep your distance.

Verses 6 to 10 have a chiasmic or book-ended structure. As Bruce Waltke observes, verses 6 and 10 concern the hiring of a fool, which you should not do. Verses 7 to 9, the fool using proverbs, and then in the centre, giving honour to a fool.

It is that central element that explains the rest. The other things that are mentioned here, the fool bearing words of wisdom in his mouth, or the fool being entrusted with responsible tasks, are all unwise forms of honouring the fool. The fool is a figure who should be exposed, disgraced, and pitied.

He should never be honoured, and any that honour him are merely inviting trouble. If the faithful messenger is like an extra pair of feet for the person who sends him, and also like a refreshing drink or someone who brings healing, the foolish messenger is quite the opposite. The person who sent him is worse off than if he had no messenger at all, and he ends up receiving violence rather than receiving health.

Proverbs are lame and powerless in the mouth of the fool. The fool doesn't know how to use them. However, in his ignorance of how to use them, he can actually cause damage, as we see in verse 9. He is like a drunkard wielding a thorn bush.

The commissioned fool is also like an archer that ends up hurting people. The wise person will know better than to hire or to give an education to the fool, who will merely use it to cause damage and to confirm him in his folly. The fool confirmed in his folly is described in verse 12, the man who is wise in his own eyes.

Far better to be a base and obvious fool than to be a fool with the veneer of learning, a fool who is heeded and is given reason to believe that he has something to contribute. The imbetterate fool is the subject of verse 11. For such a fool his folly has become so habitual that there is no hope of his escaping from it.

2 Peter 2 21-22 uses this proverb. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them.

The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire. Verses 13-16 concern the sluggard. Verse 13, largely repeating Proverbs 22-13, the sluggard says, There is a lion outside, I shall be killed in the streets.

One point of this proverb is that the sluggard will habitually rationalise his laziness. Verse 14 compares the sluggard to the door moving on its hinges. The sluggard is set in

his bed, as the door is set in its hinges.

Neither has an extensive range of movement. However, the door, turning on its hinges, can actually be useful. The sluggard, however, is nothing of the kind.

Proverbs 19-24 read, The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, and will not even bring it back to his mouth. In verse 15 we are told that the reason for this is that he is so worn out. The sluggard perpetually complains of his tiredness.

He cannot exert himself. Even when he has food directly in front of him, he will end up starving because of his failure to put in any effort. Verses 5-12 have spoken of the danger of someone who is wise in his own eyes, and the sluggard is one such example.

The sluggard is the classic example of the incompetent person, who, because he has not put in the effort to understand things, doesn't even know the measure of what he doesn't know. He is the pub expert. One might think, for instance, of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, as she spoke of the piano.

If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. True wisdom and skill takes discipline, diligence and application. The sluggard, lacking all of those things, never attains it.

Verses 17-22 concern quarrelers and those who cause conflict. Keeping out of conflicts not your own was the subject of Proverbs 22, verse 3. It's the subject of verse 17 here. The person who gets embroiled in other people's fights is merely inviting trouble.

Verses 18-19 concern the cruel jester, the person who would mask his vicious action as a prank or as a mere joke. He is compared to a madman hurling dangerous projectiles. Paying no care to his action, he is unmindful and utterly unconcerned about the damage that he might cause.

Having the measure of such a person, you should keep well clear. Verses 20-22 concern other figures who cause trouble for all who are around them. There are certain individuals in communities who are the cause of all the conflicts and the strife and the difficulties.

If you effectively remove such people, suddenly all of the conflicts and discord ceases. Proverbs 22, verse 10 makes a similar point. Drive out a scoffer and strife will go out, and quarrelling and abuse will cease.

Whisperers and slanderers are a particular danger. Proverbs 18, verse 8. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels. They go down into the inner parts of the body.

That verse is repeated here in the context of these troublesome figures within a community. One should steer clear of such individuals, and if you can, remove them from

the community altogether. The concluding verses of the chapter concern unfaithful or hypocritical friends. Such persons are compared to the glaze or the sheen that can be on an earthen vessel.

What may look attractive and precious on the surface may be nothing of the kind when you see underneath. These unfaithful friends are particularly defined by their lying tongues and by their flattery. They mask menace and hatred.

It is quite possible that they don't feel hatred towards the people that they are deceiving and flattering. Rather, they may just be seeking their own ends in a selfish manner. But that selfishness is tantamount to hatred of others.

It leads just as surely to other people's ill. The wise person should be able to see through such figures. A question to consider.

Within this chapter we've seen the figure of the fool, the sluggard, quarrellers and those who cause conflict, and finally unfaithful and hypocritical friends. We often see blurring of the lines between these various figures. What are some of the affinities that these different figures and their characteristic vices can have with each other? Proverbs chapter 27 continues the gathering of Solomonic proverbs by Hezekiah's men.

The meaning of proverbs can be enhanced by a new setting, and we encounter some examples of that here. The opening verses deal with the subject of boasting and praise. It is dangerous to be overconfident and boast about your plans.

While we should have considered purposes, our destiny is not finally in our own hands. Proverbs chapter 16 verse 9, The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. Similar points are made in James chapter 4 verses 13 to 16.

Come now, you who say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town, and spend a year there and trade and make a profit. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? But you are amiss that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Instead you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance, all such boasting is evil. Recognizing the Lord's sovereignty over all of our actions, we will be much less inclined to boast about future plans.

Our inability to control the future, or to know fully what is expected in the future, has two sides to it. On the one side it humbles us before the Lord's sovereignty, and on the other side it throws us upon the Lord's provision. It curbs our boasting, but it can also, as Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, relieve our anxieties.

Recognizing his providential rule over the future, we can cast ourselves upon the Lord. Self-praise is of little worth, and praise from family members and close friends is also of

little value. Far better to be modest in all our speaking about ourselves, and allow other people who are strangers to praise us.

Praise from such a source will carry a great deal more weight than anything that we could say about ourselves. A stone is heavy and difficult to bear, as is a great quantity of sand. Worse than either of these is the anger of a fool.

Those who have to suffer it will find it very difficult to endure. However, if wrath and anger are difficult to bear, jealousy is so much worse. Michael Fox writes, And it does not compare to that of sexual jealousy, because the latter includes anger and much else.

Jealousy embraces the shame of betrayed love, the affront to personal honor, and in the case of sexual love, the insult to sexual prowess and more. Their combined force is irresistible, both to their possessor and their target. For jealousy enrages a man.

He'll not relent in the day of vengeance. Proverbs 6.34 In cases where the love is not betrayed, the jealousy is directed at anyone who might intrude in the couple's bond. Then the jealousy is infused with the power of love itself and is insuperable.

Verse 5 works with the seeming contradiction between rebuke and love. Of course, these things are not contradictory at all. If you love someone, you will be prepared to rebuke them.

However, rebuke is not pleasant, and it can often be mistaken for something opposed to love. It is far better to give an open rebuke from love than to remain silent in order to be nice. The open rebuke may wound, while the hidden love, while it may shrink back from offending the other person, falls far short.

Verse 6 continues on the same theme. The true friend who is prepared to wound his companion and tell him what he really thinks when he thinks that his companion is going astray is faithful. Perhaps counterintuitively, it's the person who will shower their companion with kisses and affirmation and give them all sorts of flattery that is the real enemy.

They are concerned to be liked for their own selfish purposes. They are either too cowardly or too driven by self-interest to tell their companion what he really needs to know. It is good to deal candidly with people, to avoid hiding matters that need to be dealt with openly.

All of this should be done in love and for the sake of love. We can see this principle in Leviticus chapter 19, verses 17 to 18. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. Dealing openly and swiftly with

one's neighbor, rather than allowing bitterness to fester in your heart, is an important practice to ensure that love is not compromised.

Both the appetite of the person who overindulges in honey and the appetite of the person who starves himself are unhealthy and unable to discriminate between foods as they ought to. This proverb would seem to encourage moderation, enjoying good gifts but not overindulging. The man who strays from his home is compared to a bird that has left its nest.

Such a person has abandoned his station and vocation and as a result is dangerously unsettled and perhaps even not to be trusted. Sirach chapter 36, verses 29 to 31 speaks of a man without such a station, without a home, in similar language. He who acquires a wife gets his best possession, a helper fit for him and a pillar of support.

Where there is no fence, the property will be plundered, and where there is no wife, a man will become a fugitive and a wanderer. For who will trust a nimble robber that skips from city to city? So who will trust a man that has no nest but lodges wherever night overtakes him? It is good and healthy to have a station and a vocation in life, something that ties you down, a wife and a home that you are serving. The wise man prizes truthful counsel and the counsel of a good friend is one of the greatest forms of counsel of all.

The true friend knows you, he is concerned for your good and he is prepared to speak honestly to you. He has a good idea what you need to hear and he is prepared to tell it. As his concern is your good, he is not trying to advance himself over you and he will also be discreet in the way that he exposes your faults.

Such a friend is a very valuable thing to have and if you have such friends, be prepared to rely upon them. While it may be tempting only to rely upon one's family, if you are in distress, you will often find that a good friend is nearer to hand than a brother. In such cases you should go to them.

Indeed, asking a favour in such circumstances may even strengthen the relationship that you have with your friend, rather than compromising it. The wise son is a cause of strength for his father. Faced with his adversaries, the man with wise sons will find himself more confident.

He has the support of his sons behind him. Verse 12 largely repeats chapter 22 verse 3. The simpleton is someone who pointlessly runs into trouble, whereas the prudent person sees it in advance and gives it a wide berth. Verse 13 repeats chapter 20 verse 16, another warning about a situation of giving security.

However, in contrast to chapter 20 verse 16, which speaks of foreigners, in this translation it speaks of an adulteress. We might recall the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38 of Genesis. When thinking about speech, it is important to recognise that

speech itself is an action.

It is not just the contents of the words. It is also the way that we speak that matters. The person who blesses his neighbour loudly in the morning is waking him up before he has had a full night's sleep.

Whatever the words may say, it is an unkind act. This principle can be applied quite broadly. We might think about situations where people claim to be delighting in telling the truth, when it is clear that they delight primarily in provocation, just as getting our brother up early in the morning with an ill-timed blessing is not an act of love.

So it is possible for a man to tell truth to his neighbour in a way that functions as a falsehood and a curse. The misery of a house with a quarrelsome or nagging wife has been the subject of a number of proverbs. A wife is likely to be a man's greatest source of delight and strength, or his greatest source of misery and weakness.

Choosing carefully is very important. The quarrelsome wife is described as a figure who wears down a man, like the continual dripping of rain, perhaps a leak in a roof. Your home should be a place of shelter, but here it is described as a place that has a storm within.

It contains the wind. She is like oil in a man's right hand. The right hand, the hand of strength, is compromised in its ability to grasp and master things, because the oil of the quarrelsome wife causes things to slip through its fingers.

The meaning of verse 17 has been debated. Michael Fox suggests that it refers to magnetised iron. Iron joins to magnetised iron, and when man joins to the face of his fellow, this would refer to the attraction of companionship and fellowship.

However, given the period that Proverbs was written in, magnetised iron would probably not have been well known. More likely this refers to the sharpening effects of iron on iron, and the word face is playing with its two meanings, the face of a blade and the face of a man. Just as the hardness of iron renders it suitable to sharpen another piece of iron, so a candid and intelligent friend can sharpen the wits of his companion.

A servant taking concern for the well-being of his master, guarding and serving him, is compared to the gardener who tends a fig tree. His concern for the fig tree means that he will be blessed from it. Likewise with the faithful servant of a human master.

As he ministers to his master, he will be blessed by him. Verse 19 makes a comparison with the way that water reflects the face of a person, although there is much debate about what the comparison in question is. Fox lists a number of possibilities.

Perhaps a community of feelings is what is in view, or maybe it's insight that gives greater knowledge, or introspection into one's own soul, maybe it's fellowship as you

turn to another, or the exposure of hearts in such fellowship. It might also refer to a recognition of others' feelings. Bruce Waltke suggests that given the context which is concerned with friendship, it means that a person can recognize his own character by looking to his friends.

In their compliments, their criticisms and their counsel, a man can gain from his friends a clearer idea of his own character. The insatiability of human appetite is the subject of verse 20, compared to the insatiability of the grave itself, and perhaps no less destructive. Testing people and improving people are the subject of verses 21 and 22.

The first concerns the man that is tested by his praise. As you pay attention to the way that people speak of someone, you will get a good measure of their character. Pay attention to who says things about him, and what they say.

Fools will be attracted to folly, and so those whose praise is always on the lips of the simple should be suspected of folly themselves. The fool can be impervious to improvement and education, while grain can be improved through the mortar and the pestle, and simpletons who are receptive to wisdom can become wise through education. Such processes are wasted on the fool.

He won't respond to them. Once again, we are supposed to be alert to the unteachability of certain people. The final verses of the chapter talk about the blessings and the sustainability of a subsistence lifestyle.

Riches and social honors can easily pass away. Even a crown does not endure forever. However, the riches of the land, and the riches of good livestock, can increase and continue over time.

Pay close attention to such property in your possession, and take good care of it, and it will provide for you in the very long term. Some commentators have seen in this a reference to the duty of the king, arguing that this is addressing by analogy the one who is the shepherd of the nation. A question to consider.

Once again in verse 22, Proverbs brings up the character of the unteachable. What are some of the distinguishing traits of the unteachable person? 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.

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. I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you.

Guilt has an enervating 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 is 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 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. Leviticus 25, verses 35-36 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 9-10 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 describe the danger of wisdom in one's own eyes. Such wisdom in one's own eyes is a particular form

of folly.

It is characterized 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, 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, Also in Proverbs chapter 20 verse 2, The wicked and oppressive king is also like a lion, but he devours, tyrannizes 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 neighbor is prepared to rebuke him. Faithful are the wounds of such a friend.

Indeed, such a person may find that he is more honored 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.

Verse 24 speaks to a situation where a son dishonors 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 dishonoring of parents that fits this description. In Mark chapter 7, verses 9 to 13. If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me as Corban, 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? Proverbs chapter 29 concludes the second section of Solomon's Proverbs.

At a number of points in the book of Proverbs, slow and gradual habitual processes with sudden ends are described. Here it is that of resistance to rebuke. The person who has given many reproofs and yet responds by hardening himself against them will experience a sudden destruction.

Having run through all of the warning signs that he has been given, he faces a final collision that he cannot avoid. Verse 2 is the third of four related statements in chapters 28 and 29. Chapter 28 verse 12 When the righteous triumph, there is great glory, but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves.

Chapter 28 verse 28 When the wicked rise, people hide themselves, but when they perish, the righteous increase. Chapter 29 verse 2 When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan. And then in verse 16 of this chapter When the wicked increase, transgression increases, but the righteous will look upon their downfall.

The contrasting fortunes of the righteous and the wicked have ramifications for the whole society. Verse 3 is another proverb speaking of the consequences of wisdom or folly in a son for his parents. The wise son is a cause of gladness in his father.

The dissolute son, who is the companion of prostitutes, ends up bringing dishonor to his father and squanders his father's inheritance. All that for which the father had sacrificed and labored is now going to waste in the most dishonorable of ways. Chapter 29 of Proverbs often moves between the household and the nation.

Whereas verse 3 spoke about the household and the way that the foolish son would squander the family fortune. In chapter 4 we're talking about the building up of nations or their tearing down. The righteous king builds up his nation by the practice of justice, by observing and enacting the law, acting on behalf of the oppressed and establishing

righteousness.

By contrast, the corrupt ruler, the one who is gathering bribes or excessive taxes, will end up undermining and weakening the whole nation. Verses 5 and 6 should be read together. In verse 5 we see the flatterer as one who is spreading a net for a person's feet.

Whose feet? Is it for the neighbor's feet? It seems to be that way in a number of places in the book of Proverbs. It might also be, as we read it alongside verse 6, for his own feet. He does not realize, but he will be ensnared in his own transgression.

Those who are given to trickery and traps will often find themselves tangled up in them. The description of the righteous man, by contrast, is an arresting one. He sings and rejoices.

This is the song of the victorious person, of the person who has escaped the trap or been delivered from it. The principle of the wicked being caught in their own schemes is one that we encounter on several occasions in the book of Proverbs. For instance, in chapter 1, verse 19, The righteous person is not just righteous for his own sake, as a sort of private morality.

He is concerned for justice within the society at large. And he gives thought to the judgments delivered concerning the poor, the duties that people have towards the poor, the ways that the poor have been offended against, and the processes of law and society by which the situation of the poor is being ameliorated and the injustices committed against them being rectified. The wicked man, by contrast, is quite unmindful of these things.

The responsibility to take an active interest in the rights of the poor is especially pronounced in the case of the king, as we see in Proverbs 31, verses 4-5. The righteous man has an active social conscience and is always mindful of what he can do to address the injustices of his own society. The wider social impact of the righteous and the wicked and their behaviour is again the subject of verse 8, the proverb there speaks of the impact of scoffers and of the wise.

The scoffers cause conflict within the society and end up calling judgment upon it, whereas the wise turn away wrath. The wrath being referred to here may be the conflict within the society more generally, or it may be the Lord's wrath more particularly, or it may be both. The unteachability of the fool is the subject of verse 9. The fool's resistance to correction and his unteachability is a common issue within the book of Proverbs.

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself, in Proverbs 26, verse 4. Arguing with a fool can be like a fool's errand. You're not going to have any success. He will respond with mockery and laughter and only be more confirmed in his

position by the time that you are done.

Murderous men have a particular enmity towards those people who are blameless and upright. The righteous man exposes by contrast the character of the wicked, and those who are most wicked will express their enmity towards the righteous by seeking their very lives. Self-control and mastery of your spirit and your temper is a notable hallmark of wisdom in the book of Proverbs.

A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls. Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city. The folly of the fool and the wisdom of the wise can often most clearly be seen in the contrasting ways that they respond to aggravation.

The wise person is able to master his spirit and as a result to hold back from saying things that are rash and foolish. The fool by contrast possesses no such mastery and ends up giving full vent to his opinion. By the simple act of being able to hold his tongue in such a situation, the fool would have been considered very differently.

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. When he closes his lips he is deemed intelligent. Chapter 17 verse 28 The corruption of a kingdom can go from the top down.

A ruler who has listened to lies will end up forming a corrupt regime around him. We can think about this in the case of David. As he sinned and lied concerning Uriah and Bathsheba, the corruption of his kingdom went all the way down.

His officials started to be characterised by corruption, lies and unfaithfulness. Verse 13 should remind us of chapter 22 verse 2. The rich and the poor meet together. The Lord is the maker of them all.

However here it is referring to a meeting between a negative character, the oppressor, and the poor man. Here the Lord is described not as the maker but as the giver of life. It is the Lord who has given the light to the eyes of both the poor and the oppressor.

Implied here is a sense of the seriousness of what the oppressor is doing. He is presuming upon the continued grace of the Lord who has given him life and is sustaining him in it. Verse 14 also relates to the proper treatment of the poor and once more speaks particularly to the role of the king.

The king who judges the poor with equity is a king who will find his own throne established forever. The Lord is the patron of the poor. The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord.

The one who enacts justice towards the poor is the one who will receive the blessing of the Lord as he is doing the Lord's own work. The power of a foolish son to bring misery to his parents in their older age is frequently mentioned in the book of Proverbs. Such a son

wanting his inheritance right away might turf his parents out of their property.

In his folly he can squander their wealth and bring dishonor upon the family by consorting with prostitutes and others. However a father who faithfully disciplines his son will find that when he is in his older age his son will give him honor and rest. The father who fails to discipline may find quite the opposite.

A lack of exertion in training his son in his earlier years leads to considerable misery down the line and damage that cannot easily be rectified. Prevention in such a case is so much better than cure. Man should live by the word of the Lord and where there is no prophetic vision a people lack direction.

However those who devote themselves to meditating upon the law can find clarity in dark times. Verses 19 and 21 speak to masters in the treatment of their servants. The servant within the house could be subjected to corporal punishment.

Unlike the hired worker he would not just be dismissed from his position and mere words of rebuke would be a very limited deterrent or corrective. The servant might understand the words of rebuke but he would be unlikely to heed them. The person who just pampered his servants would find that he lost their respect and in the end overran his house.

These verses might shock modern sensibilities. It is important that we read them alongside other biblical teaching concerning masters and servants which encourage a healthy relationship between the master and the servant to the extent that servants should often want to remain in the house. A man and those people that surround him can both become the victims of his vices.

In verses 22 and 23 we have two examples of this. The whole community of those surrounding the man of wrath labour under the burden of his strife. He is a cause of conflict and sin that can infect an entire community.

In verse 23 it is the pride of a person that can bring him low. The very pride at the heart of a person's self-assertion is the greatest threat to their well-being. By contrast the person who is lowly in spirit, a characteristic that comes with the fear of the Lord, is one who will ultimately obtain honour.

The person who enters into dealings with a thief will find it difficult to escape being caught up in the thief's own crimes. The background to this verse can be seen in places like Leviticus chapter 5 verse 1. If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity. And then in Zechariah chapter 5 verses 3 to 4. And it shall remain in his house and consume it, both timber and stones.

The person who has dealings with the thief, perhaps buying stolen goods, will be

reluctant to disclose what he knows. He has become a beneficiary of the crime and as a result he ends up covering it up and bringing the curse upon that crime upon himself. Verses 25 and 26 speak about the place to which we should look for deliverance.

Those with the fear of man are often looking primarily to rulers. They fear rulers and they look to rulers for deliverance. The person who fears the Lord and trusts in the Lord, however, is in a very different position.

Although it is not inappropriate to seek justice from rulers, indeed it is a positive thing to do, verse 26 reminds us that justice ultimately comes from the Lord. He is the one that we should look to primarily. Even when human rulers fail to deliver justice, we can still find justice from the Lord.

The final verse of the chapter concerns the enmity that exists between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, between the unjust and the righteous. This enmity exists on both sides and understanding the existence of, the character of and the purpose of this enmity is a crucial dimension of the task of wisdom. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the enmity between the righteous and the wicked plays out in society and history? Proverbs chapter 30 is a new gathering of proverbs.

It belongs to Agur the son of Jaker, a figure about whom we know nothing else. The sayings of this chapter consist of a personal confession, followed by a number of numerical proverbs or epigrams. The style of the proverbs of this chapter differ markedly from those in the preceding sections of the book.

It might be read as something of an appendix. The extent of the material of Agur in this chapter is debated. Some say that it only takes us up to verse 4, others suggest verse 6 or 9, some up to verse 14, and others have argued that the entire chapter 30 belongs to Agur.

The sayings of Agur, or at least the initial part, is described as an oracle, a divinely inspired message. We usually associate the oracle with the prophetic literature, but here at the end of a wisdom book in Proverbs it is applied to a number of wisdom sayings. We find a similar formula for an oracle in places like 2 Samuel chapter 23 verse 1. Now these are the last words of David.

One of the first questions facing the interpreter of this chapter is whether there is a change of speaker between verses 1 to 4 and 5 to 6. Depending on our treatment of this question, we will read this section rather differently. Bruce Waltke argues for the unity of this section, using the analogy of Job chapter 28 verses 12 to 28, where Job also moves from a confession of man's insufficiency to discover wisdom, to a series of rhetorical questions that point to God's unique possession of such wisdom, to a recognition that God can teach men such wisdom. Some scholars see at the beginning, in the statement,

I am weary O God, I am weary and worn out, personal names of the people to whom Agur is speaking, Ithiel and Yuhkal.

These would presumably be the sons of Agur. However, if these are their names, we are not told that they are his sons here, which is one of the considerations that might lead us to lean in favour of reading these words as part of his confession, a reference to his weariness and being worn out. While some have seen in Agur's statement an impious statement of someone who does not have the fear of the Lord, this is unlikely.

Far more likely he is expressing the limitations of human wisdom and the bounds placed upon the extent to which it can aspire to the knowledge of God. Agur speaks in a self-deprecating fashion. Michael Fox compares Agur's statement here to that found in Psalm 73 verse 22.

I was brutish and ignorant, I was like a beast toward you. Agur denies possession of such knowledge, and the knowledge in question is probably not the sort of wisdom that is being discussed in the rest of the Book of Proverbs. Rather, it is the knowledge of the Holy One, a knowledge of God's secret and hidden ways.

For Agur, God's thoughts greatly exceed our thoughts, and his ways are beyond our understanding. The rhetorical questions of verse 4 should remind us of Job chapter 28 verses 12-22. Nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.

No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal. The price of wisdom is above pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold.

From where, then, does wisdom come, and where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. Of Eden and Geth say, we have heard a rumor of it with our ears. Agur's saying from these rhetorical questions moves into a confession of the Word of God.

The Word of God is the ultimate source of truth and security. For the man who feels keenly his lack of wisdom, he must look to the Lord. It is from the Lord that he will find his protection, and from whom he will learn understanding.

Job chapter 28 verses 23-28 God understands the way to it, and He knows its place. For He looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens. When He gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned the waters by measure, when He made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then He saw it and declared it, He established it and searched it out.

And He said to man, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. Verses 7-9 contain a prayer, which is very unusual in the wisdom literature. Within it, Agur prays for deliverance from falsehood and lying.

Within his prayer, he is concerned that he maintain his integrity. He does not want to be a person given to deceit, and in his prayer he is seeking the Lord's help in this matter. Likewise, he wants neither poverty nor riches.

He desires moderation in his possessions, because he knows that if he has a lot, he will be faced with the temptation of practical atheism, and if he has too little, he will be tempted to become a thief. More than anything else, he wants to ensure that he lives a life that is honouring to God, a life that is pious and characterised by integrity. If he is going to live such a life, he will need the Lord's protection from temptation, and His empowering strength.

Within the Book of Proverbs, slander is seen to be universally wrong. Verse 10 speaks of slandering a servant to his master, a situation where the object of one's slander is defenceless and vulnerable, and the act of slander could be severely damaging. In such a situation, the slave can appeal to the Lord.

A slave who cursed the slanderer in such a situation would be invoking the Lord's judgement upon the person. Those who mistreat the poor should beware of such consequences. This chapter contains several numerical proverbs or epigrams, many of them of the form X and X plus 1. The number of items is generally X plus 1, with the final element being the one that is particularly emphasised.

The lists generally involve classing together several diverse and disparate phenomena, inviting the reader to reflect upon the comparisons or associations between them. Verses 11-14 are held together by the repeated There are those, or in other translations, a generation that. A single group is being described here, and the reader is being invited to reflect upon the logic of the association of their characteristics, dishonouring parents, self-righteousness, haughtiness and cruelty.

Fox argues that one of the effects of this is to highlight the collective character of sin. These verses describe the way that an entire people can become distinctively corrupted by evil. The sins that are mentioned in this list are sins that are also mentioned elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs, for instance cursing father and mother, Proverbs 20.20 If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness.

Self-righteousness is spoken against in 20.9 The leech of verse 15 has two daughters with identical names and demands. This might be a reference to the suckers on both ends of the horse leech. It is connected with the evil generation that precedes it, and with the four insatiable things that follow.

You are supposed to recognise such a figure and avoid them. From the second half of verse 15 into verse 16, we have the first proverb of the form X things and X plus one things. Here it is three things that are never satisfied, four that never say enough.

The point of the proverb is for us to ponder upon the connections between the different items, to think about analogies between them, and ways in which the analogies and connections open up windows into a deeper reality. In this particular proverb, we have two frustrated sources of life, which are insatiable, bracketed by corresponding sources of death and destruction, which are also insatiable. Sheol or the grave is the place of death that can never be filled up.

The barren womb is the source of life that has been frustrated. There is a natural correspondence between these two things. The grave itself is like a barren womb that will be opened up in the event of Christ's resurrection.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the earth giving birth to its dead. Just as the womb and the tomb are opposing yet related forces, so water and fire stand in opposition. Here the land never satisfied with water is also like the barren womb that produces no fruit.

The destroying fire for its part is like Sheol. This proverb invites us to think about the parallels between things that devour and things that cannot bring forth. It also encourages us to reflect upon the insatiability of the force of death within the creation.

Verse 17 seems to stand out a bit in its context. Perhaps a connection between this and the surrounding proverbs could be inferred from Proverbs 27.20 Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied and never satisfied are the eyes of man. From a proverb about that which is never satisfied, Sheol being one example, we now move to a proverb concerning the eye of the wicked son.

Such an eye will be picked out by the ravens and the vultures. Creation itself abhors such dishonoring appearance. The numerical proverb that follows concerns four wonderful things.

In particular the wonderful things are the ways of the four items that are described. Belonging to various realms. The eagle in the sky, the serpent on the rock, the ship on the seas and the man with the virgin.

Once again these items do not appear to have been chosen at random. The eagle and the serpent are a pairing of natural creatures. One in the sky, one on the earth.

The ship and the man with the virgin are both human things, one on the seas and one on the land. If you spend any time looking at an eagle soaring in the heavens or a serpent gliding on a large rock, you may well marvel at the effortless yet remarkable way that they move. The eagle's realm is the sky, the serpent is on the rock, the ship is on the high seas and there we can marvel at the way that a human vessel can move with the waves and with the winds, forces of immense strength yet follow a course of human direction.

The fourth element in the list stands out from the other three however. Those three

former elements evoke something of the wonder of creation itself of the natural world and of human activity within it. And now the fourth element concerns something more marvelous still, the way of a man with a young woman, presumably one who has not yet had sexual experience.

There is something properly mysterious about the sexual relationship between a man and a woman, especially in the initial consummation of a union, and this wonderful character invites us to think of it in terms of the wonders of the cosmos more generally. There is something occurring in such sexual union that exceeds our understanding, something delightful and beautiful, something that should invite our awe and our wonder. There is however a fifth way that is added to this proverb, which is the way of the adulteress, which seen against the backdrop of the way of a man with a virgin, is perceived in its true ugliness.

In euphemistic language, Eger describes the adulteress who eats and wipes her mouth, engaging in sexual relations and then cleaning up, as if nothing had happened at all, as if she hadn't profaned something wonderful by her perverse actions. Verses 21 to 23 contain a numerical proverb that speaks about disruptions to the social order. The earth trembles beneath these things.

They represent a sort of social earthquake. The first is the slave or the lower official who becomes a king, presumably in an act of revolution. The next is the fool or social outcast who is filled with food.

Then there is the unloved or hateful woman who gets a husband, gaining much social influence to perform her mischief. And then there is the maidservant who displaces her mistress, presumably by getting the master to commit adultery with her and cast out his wife. Each of these characters have larger social ramifications that disrupt much around them.

The person who desires the good order of a society should feel a sense of horror at each one of these examples. From great social threats we move to examples of animals that we can learn from. The animals described here are weak or small, but have compensating forms of wisdom.

Proverbs 6, verse 6 directed the sluggard to pay attention to the ant and learn from his behaviour. Here the ants are characterised by their diligent providence. They lay up food in the summer so that they will be prepared when the difficult days come.

They do this despite not being strong. The wisdom of providence can compensate for physical weakness. The rock badgers are also not mighty, and yet they compensate for this by making their homes in secure locations.

The locusts don't have a king, and yet they still exhibit great unity, wisely marching in

ranks. The lizard is the final example. The lizard is weak and can be taken up in human hands, but nonetheless it is found in king's palaces.

No compensating wisdom of the lizard is mentioned here. Rather the point is that if the lizard, with its weakness and its vulnerability, can be found in king's palaces, the wise man who compensates for his forms of weakness should be able to be found there too. Once again the proverb has a poetic structure to it that invites closer reflection.

You can see in verses 25 and 26 they are held together by the reference to a people, and in verses 27 to 28 with the reference to a king. The final numerical proverb concerned things that are regal in the way that they move. The first three examples in this list are animals, and the final one is the king surrounded by his army.

The stately animals each exhibit certain traits. The lion is mighty, and by his strength provides a deterrent for any who would want to attack. The lion is not afraid of any creature, and he exhibits his regal character in his fearlessness.

Many societies have recognized the regal character of the lion, speaking of him as the king of the jungle or the king of the beasts. Lions have been taken as symbols of rulers, not least in Israel, with the lion of the tribe of Judah. The strutting rooster is another example of a regal animal.

The rooster struts with command. He is aggressive towards any threat. He keeps others in line.

He both provides and courageously protects. The he-goat is another example of a regal figure. He is a sure-footed and inquisitive figure who establishes dominance within his group.

Like the lion with the pride, or the rooster with the brood of chickens, the he-goat is a creature committed to the group around him. In all of these animals we see something of the virtues that should characterize the king's relationship with his army. The king needs to project an effective image of might so that people don't attack.

The king needs to be fierce against all aggressors and to establish dominance, all in service of his people. The prominence of the figure and the context of the king in these proverbs suggests that it might be directed particularly to people in the context of rule and authority in a society. The chapter ends with a warning, seemingly directed to those who exalt themselves as rulers in a way that is proud or who have devised evil.

Such foolish rulers are advised to stop immediately, and they are warned against the consequences of oppression. Pressing milk produces curds, pressing the nose produces blood, and pressing anger, constantly inciting a people by oppressive policies, will produce strife and violence. If you want to rule over a peaceful people, you must be acutely aware of the dangers of pressing anger.

A question to consider. We noted the characterization of the generation in verses 11-14. What might be some of the ways in which the vices of the generation described in those verses produce or encourage each other? Chapter 31 represents the final collection of the Book of Proverbs, concluding the book with the words of King Lemuel received from his mother concerning the noble king and the wise wife.

This is not just an appendix to the Book of Proverbs, it draws together many of the themes that have been running throughout the whole. The concern to prepare the young prince for rule, and to prepare him to choose a wise woman, have been prominent throughout the whole text, and now they come to their condensed, final expression. Proverbs began with the young man being taught by his father and instructed not to forget the teaching of his mother.

The book ends with the young man having left his father and mother, passing on the teaching that his mother once gave him, and sharing a poem of praise to the wise wife, the woman by which such a leader of his community would be elevated. Some have argued that King Lemuel is only the source of the first nine verses of this chapter, however that seems unlikely, as it would only attribute a small section to him, and would also leave the final poem of the book without attribution. We do not know who King Lemuel was, we should probably assume that he was some God-fearing king in the ancient Near East.

He passes on the words of this chapter, but he is not actually the author of them. Whether or not the words all originated with her, the words were taught to him by his mother. Verses 2-9 concern the behaviour of a noble king.

She begins by addressing him as her son, and then with the affectionate term as son of my womb, and then as son of my vows, perhaps in reference to vows that she had made to raise him up in the instruction of the Lord. As Lemuel's mother, she was very concerned about those to whom Lemuel gave his heart. The virility and strength of a young man can often be devoted to unworthy women, and can lead him to his own destruction.

Lemuel needs to be on his guard. Such women could be his destruction, as for many kings before him, and many after. A great many kings have been led astray by their hearts and by their lusts.

In the pursuit of unfaithful women, they have squandered their strengths and their riches. The most notable example of this, particularly as we read the Book of Proverbs, is Solomon himself. We might also think here of characters like King Ahab, or of Herod, men whose wickedness was greatly compounded by their evil wives.

It is good, as we see later in this chapter, for a man to give his strength to a woman, but he should give his strength to the wise wife, who will in turn strengthen him. A further

danger, alongside strange women and many concubines, is that of a king who gives himself over to his appetites, particularly a king who gives himself to excesses of wine. The resulting inebriation makes it difficult for such a king to exercise justice.

He will pervert and forget the law, and he will fail to deliver justice to those to whom it is due. It is not a bad thing to drink wine. Indeed, wisdom offers wine to her guests.

The danger is that of drunkenness. Lemuel's mother sarcastically argues that if anyone has to be given excesses of wine, it should be to those who are dying, or in bitter distress. They can drown their sorrows if they must, but it is not for a king to drink wine.

This statement should not be taken seriously. It is almost certainly sarcastic. Lemuel is charged to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, and to stand up for the rights of those without resources.

The king is supposed to be the great advocate and defender of the poor. The lord is the protector of the widow and the fatherless, the stranger and the alien, and the king who rules in the name of the lord will have his throne established as he acts on behalf of these groups. Proverbs chapter 31, and the book of Proverbs as a whole, ends with a poem concerning the valorous wife.

The Proverbs 31 woman has a reputation that precedes her. If Helen of Troy was the face that launched a thousand ships, the Proverbs 31 woman might be the biblical figure who launched a myriad of women's bible study series. She has been set forth as a standard for women to aspire to, and as a standard by which to judge them.

This can make it difficult for us to read this passage in its proper context. Proverbs chapter 31 isn't actually a text written primarily for women, but for men. It teaches the man to recognize the wise wife, and to honor her as she is due.

These are the words of King Lemuel, but they are originally the words of his mother to him. This is an internalized lesson. It is also a lesson given by a mother concerning the woman that she desires for her son.

It is one of the places in scripture where we see the voice of a woman come to the fore, and it is a woman's teaching concerning a woman. We should also attend to the form of the teaching here. Although it is so frequently transposed into the form of command, it isn't actually given to us in that form.

The rhetorical form of teaching is important. This text isn't command, it isn't even straightforwardly framed as persuasion. It is rather a poem of praise to the figure of the wise wife, extolling her manifold virtues.

It is praising that which is praiseworthy, a valorizing of the valuable, thereby instructing Lemuel as to what he needs to look for in a woman. It comes at the very end of the book.

It's not just some appended thoughts at the end.

Oh, here's some miscellaneous stuff that didn't fit elsewhere. No, it sums up the larger message of the book. The book began with the young man under the teaching of his father and mother, and ends with the wise wife.

A man leaves his father and mother, and is joined to his wife. This is a movement into maturity, and it frames the whole book. Here the book's interwoven themes of the young man's quest for love and the search for wisdom arrive at a poetic resolution in a climactic statement that unites them.

The figure of Lady Wisdom, by whom God created the world, is incarnated, as it were, in the virtuous wife. We can see this as we look through the statements concerning the wise wife. The portrait reaches back to the beginning of Proverbs and the portrait of wisdom.

Like Lady Wisdom, the excellent wife's value is far above Jules. As we see in chapter 3, verse 15, she is more precious than Jules, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Or in chapter 8, verse 11, for wisdom is better than Jules, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

Like Lady Wisdom in her invitation to the simple in chapter 9, the excellent wife offers food. The excellent wife also brings gain, as we see in verse 11 here, which is like wisdom in chapter 3, verse 14. For the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold.

Wisdom begins from the fear of the Lord, which is precisely what animates the excellent wife. The poem in question is a heroic poem. It speaks of the woman as a valorous woman, a woman of courage and might.

Taking a form that may have been used more typically for male heroes, it applies it to a good wife in her running of her household. In praising the wise woman, it also adopts the language and the imagery of the heroic military champion. The woman is characterized by strength in verses 17 and 25.

She gets plunder in verse 11, and prey in verse 15 for her family. She girds herself with strength in verse 17, like a warrior heading out to battle. She rejoices and is celebrated like a hero returning from a great victory.

She is fearless and confident in the face of the future. She is the powerful wise woman, who through the prudent ruling of her household, brings prosperity and joy to her husband and family, and is honored by all who know her. Beauty and charm are deceitful and fleeting, yet this woman is marked out by enduring faithfulness and determined action.

The language of the valorous woman is also found in Ruth chapter 3, verse 11, and this poem has been connected with the character of Ruth by some. The poem is structured in 22 statements. The statements of the poem are an alphabetical acrostic, in which the entire book is summed up in the complete woman.

She covers all of the bases from aleph to tav. The placement of this passage at the end of the book is not accidental. It's not an awkward appending of excess material to the conclusion of the collection.

It brings the underlying themes of the book to full and true resolution. It's the capstone of the whole book. The quest for wisdom has been compared to the quest for a woman, and the young man's relationship with particular women has been connected to his quest for wisdom or for folly.

Wisdom and folly were juxtaposed in chapter 9 as two women providing invitations to simple young men. Here at the end of the book, the quest for wisdom and the quest for a particular woman with whom to spend his life are brought together in the figure of the wise wife, who in many ways incarnates wisdom. Wisdom is tied to love for and faithfulness to one's wife.

A crucial aspect of wisdom is guarding oneself from sexual temptation. We can all think of tragic examples of ways in which people have been led astray by their loves and their lusts, drawn to reject wisdom because they hate correction and reproof, yet love folly and justifying their sin. This is one reason why the choice of a marriage partner is so important.

The choice of someone to commit ourselves to in love is the choice of someone to direct and shape our values and our direction in life, to determine what we treat as a matter of first importance and those things to which we give little regard. There are few things that can be more devastatingly compromising of a person than the choice of a wicked or foolish marriage partner. This has been a recurring theme throughout the Proverbs.

If you are married, you have a position of immense influence over and responsibility for the loves, the values and the life direction of your spouse, a power that can be wielded for incredible good or evil. If you are unmarried, you should choose your partner with the utmost of care. If they are not a wise person, you may live your entire life fighting against the gravitational pull of their folly.

Wisdom is to be pursued and sought out, and we must love and cleave to her. When we attend to this image, it might seem strange, at least when compared to our cultural notions of wisdom. In our culture, wisdom tends to be considered in terms of knowledge, intelligence and the sharpness of a person's mind.

Wisdom is primarily pursued by using our brains. However, the biblical understanding of

the pursuit of wisdom begins in the heart. True wisdom is the guarding and mastering of one's heart and loves.

True wisdom is also not something that we create in ourselves, but something that must be sought out from and given by God. The virtuous woman described here then is another image of Lady Wisdom, but a characterization of the actual wife that the young man must seek. The wife performs in the life of her household what the great Lady Wisdom performs in the creation at large.

In such a woman then, the young man's quest for wisdom and his quest for a wife are resolved into a unified image. The woman described here is a woman who can be trusted by her husband, trusted to be a source of prudent and righteous counsel, someone who will run her household with wisdom and strength, and to be someone who will direct his heart towards things that are worthy of his love. The woman of Proverbs chapter 31 is idealized, and though we shouldn't struggle to see traits of actual women we know in her, we should be careful about employing her as a critical measure on actual women.

However, she does reveal the part that all women are given to play in the work of Lady Wisdom. This passage also reveals the great reward enjoyed by the wise man who is crowned by such a wife. Beauty is often valued and praised in scripture, but here it is downplayed in favor of other traits.

The manner and the content of the characterization of the woman here are instructive for us in considering the true strength of women as it is recognized and celebrated by scripture. This is a portrait that explicitly resists the reduction of women to the passivity of beauty, as we see in verse 30. It focuses rather upon the prudence, the economy, the wisdom, the providence, the faith, the productivity, and the industry of their activity.

More striking still, as Peter Lighthouse observes, the woman's work is domestic, economic, craft work, and yet the poem celebrates it in heroic terms. A heroic poem for someone engaged in domestic labor is remarkable in the ancient world, and shows something of how God regards the work of women. The great battle of the world is between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, not the seed of the man.

In their care for their households, wise women are on the front lines of God's holy war. Our failure to see the heroism and the strength of such a diligent and active woman is a failure to see the world as God does. The strength of such a woman is not that of the conformity to more typical male forms of strength, but rather is a reflection of the work of lady wisdom within the wife's own world of activity.

This is also praise of a wise woman given by another wise woman. If these are truly the words of King Lemuel's mother, she is training her son to see in a woman what she as a wiser, older woman perceives to be admirable in her sex. This is quite the opposite of the reduction of a woman to what she is in the eyes of men.

Rather, it is an encouragement given by a woman to a man to help him to see women differently. The woman here is not in competition with her husband. Rather, she works in unity with her husband, and by each spouse's faithful use of their strength, the other is built up and glorified.

By virtue of her diligence and providence in her household, she enables her husband to enjoy high social standing and a reputation in the society that he uses to strengthen her in her work and to build up her reputation among the people. She labors on behalf of her children, and her children rise up and praise her. This is a vision of a household where all members are working for the sake of each other, and are not just out selfishly to seek their own gain.

Many contemporary Christians reading this passage have been preoccupied with the question of whether the woman here is going out to work in the workplace or whether she is staying at home. This is a very wrong-headed question to ask, because the home is the workplace, it is the centre of activity, it is her realm that is extending out into the world. She does all that she does as a wife and a mother and a manager of her own household, not as an individual careerist.

She is not working for a boss or another's household. The ideal here is one of unalienated labour, where the woman is doing her work to build up her own home, where she is an active participant in the economy and the wider society, but does not have to leave the world of her household in order to participate in it. Obviously this would not be attainable for everyone in our ancient society, but in our own society it may be even less so, as the home and the economy have been substantially torn away from each other, leaving women with the choice of engaging in fungible, alienated labour in the workplace, or forming their own households in a way that is detached from the wider society.

In the figure of the wise woman here we see those two worlds brought together, perhaps in a way that functions as an indictment on us. The unveiling of the wise woman at this point should serve as something of an epiphany, a disclosure of a deep truth. The creative work of wisdom in Chapter 8 manifested in the wise wife is not a set of rules for women, but a vision of something glorious that should inspire us.

The woman here is not just a young woman, she is a woman who has matured into glory. She isn't a set of commands or a benchmark to discourage, but a vision to inspire. The wise man praises her and the wise woman emulates her.

She reveals a sort of power of women, a power to inspire and move men towards that which is good, a power to glorify, a power to integrate things into a unified and glorious world, a power to manifest the work of wisdom herself. The woman is the glory of the man, as Paul talks about it. Wisdom has built her house and the wise woman builds her house also.

We are supposed to see the one in the other. The summons of wisdom herself is heard by the man who has his eyes open to this wise wife. A question to consider, what are the different realms of activity that the wise wife is described as engaging in, in the poem concerning her here?