

Commentary on Proverbs

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Introduction to Proverbs

It would be impossible to characterize just why God decided He wanted to create a world populated with humans. Nothing in revelation provides a hint in that direction. However, we do know that Creation itself is infused with the character of God, and that we were originally designed to know that divine character instinctively. While that faculty remains, it is obscured by our fallen natures. In the Fall, we refused to let that faculty rule our lives and placed human reason on the throne in its place. Redemption is the process of restoring that lost faculty for knowing God's ways, in part by training the mind to take its proper place in service to this higher capability, as opposed to a mind serving far lesser motivations.

This was the intent of Ancient Hebrew wisdom literature. It was training the mind to accept a higher power as the source for insight into reality. As a man of letters himself, we can sense that Solomon's reign featured a major effort to establish a body of literature for restoring the mind to its proper task of understanding moral truth. Solomon wanted people to realize that God's Creation itself spoke of this moral truth, if only the mind was prepared to hear it. To Solomon, God's wisdom could be self-evident, so that you could recognize it in any source from anywhere, including the distilled wisdom literature of other nations and cultures. That his legendary learning drew visitors from those other nations placed him in a unique position to gather various expressions of divine truth from a wide range of sources.

Rather than collect vast archives of long narratives, as the Babylonians were known to do, Solomon chose to gather the smallest samples, short epigrams that would, in the fewest words possible, open up a wealth of moral understanding. Rather than pretending that moral truth can be defined and neatly explained, Hebrew literature presumed that, once the mind was accustomed to hearing from God, God Himself would bring His character to life in a willing soul. A critical element in Hebrew intellectual history is the notion that words are mere signposts to vast territories worthy of exploration. To ensure that the mind knew what to expect, moral wisdom was characterized as whatever promotes *shalom* – social stability within the Covenant. This is the sense of how things work with God in control. Folly is just about any path a man chooses that is insensitive to God's moral character in Creation.

All proverbs are contextual, as is the Hebrew language itself, often enough. In a few cases, they seem to contradict each other because the difference in context is not obvious to Western readers. Some of these proverbs aim at "Choose this, not that." Some are more a matter of, "If you choose this, it comes with that." Still others reflect holy cynicism: "It matters not what you choose because that's the way people are."

Several are repeated outright, while many are restatements of the same thought, or at least the same theme. Most of them are couplets. The proverbs come in the form of parallel ideas or as contrasts. In some cases, the second line simply expands on the first. Virtually the whole collection is cast in the context of a Covenant Nation and the society naturally arising from it. Too much of what they took for granted is not obvious when reading the proverbs, and too much of what we take for granted is simply alien to their world.

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Outline

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Part 1

Chapters 1-9: Solomon's Introduction – He calls for his son to embrace moral wisdom. Be aware that the term is flexible; a disciple could be called a "son." This book was eventually used as a textbook in training princes, nobles and their professional staffs. Solomon uses the image of Wisdom as a good woman who is seldom sought and has to go forth and call men who seem unwilling to come to her. Thus, we have this paradox of a marvelous perfect woman that every man should be fighting to have, but no one seems to want her. Contrast this to the other, more popular woman, Folly.

Proverbs 1

The first verse served as the ancient title of the entire book. The next five verses explain the reason for the book. It appears this would serve as a textbook for what we would consider secondary education. Solomon uses a string of phrases that are largely equivalent in meaning but chosen and strung together to confirm just that. Let the reader understand that you cannot pretend to slice and dice wisdom as a separate exercise from morality in general. It's not a question of what you know, but to Whom you are committed. In the Ancient Near East, moral wisdom was the ultimate proper aim of all research. In Israel this was somewhat simplified by recognizing only one God. Thus, everything men have always sought is bound up in reaching for His moral character.

Thus, the next few verses state the theme of the book as compiled revelatory wisdom from previous generations. The one treasure of every nation was social stability between generations. If you catch children early enough, you can instill a respect for their elders. It wasn't merely a promise from God that those who honored their parents would have a long life (Exodus 20:12);

that was how Creation itself worked. Respect for elders was not merely avoiding punishment but was embracing cosmic moral wisdom. Let no one mistake the matching necessity for elders to ensure they had not wasted their own lives but had sought wisdom long enough to have something to offer the young.

What begins in verse ten is not a new subject, but a dramatic restatement of what a society becomes if the elders are fools, and the young learn nothing from them. It's every individual for himself. This wild plotting to gang up on healthy adults to plunder them is a reference to one's own kin. In the ancient Hebrew society, the image is all the more shocking because they lived in tribal communities. These were irresponsible brats talking about killing their own uncles. Had they any real need, virtually everything necessary for life was already community property. How stupid is to steal from your own food stores, killing the folks who grew it for you? What kind of world would that be? So, in essence, Solomon is offering this disturbing image of what happens when moral wisdom does not remain the preoccupation of any society.

We are not supposed to take that image literally but see it as a parable. Hebrew literature at its best was parabolic in nature. Genuine moral truth was always out of reach of direct description but could be indicated by something more familiar. Thus, the rest of the chapter introduces the parable of the noble woman, Wisdom.

Solomon describes her as striving hard to get everyone's attention. In the most public fashion imaginable, yet entirely proper and honorable, this woman calls out to people everywhere. Did they listen? Apparently nowhere near as many as could have done so. She warns them that there will come a time when she will mock them after they have ignored her advice and done everything wrong. Once the pain and suffering take hold, it will be too late. Rejecting God's revelation can be deadly in many ways, she warns.

Proverbs 2

To the untrained eye, this chapter seems almost pedantic. Solomon piles up the overlapping phrases again, trying to convince his readers that God is the source of all wisdom. Our problem in Western society is that we are so utterly convinced that spiritual wisdom is one thing, and morality almost another thing, but that we can get along through life just fine with our human wisdom regarding science and technology. What difference does it make to God how someone engineers next year's car model? So long as there is nothing in the car company's actions that warrant a boycott, what does that have to do with God?

Therein lies the issue. Even in Solomon's day, there was a major problem with folks convinced they could use their human reason and wisdom to work out all kinds of things and not have to worry about divine wisdom all the time. So, Solomon uses his position as the wisest man in history, at least up to that point in that part of the world, to counteract that false notion.

If you are going to deal with reality, it's always best to start by asking the Person who made that reality. Failing to start with God's revealed moral truth means that it won't matter what you engineer; He won't bless it. That may not have a noticeable effect, or at least not so much on a human time frame, but it makes a difference. So perhaps we should not have started that car

company, never mind how the next model is engineered. Or maybe the whole concept of automobiles is terribly wrong and will eventually bring God's wrath. You won't know until you make it a point to ask God.

Start with the moral fabric of Creation, the moral character of God Himself, and everything else you do will make sense. Otherwise, nothing you do will make sense in this reality, despite how it may appear to human reason. Solomon hammers on it over and over in this chapter. He uses some rather obvious images that would tear at the fabric of a covenant society, like an adulteress. Everybody knows better, but some men just don't know how to tell that little head between their legs, "No." And by this time in Israel's history, there were plenty of well-known examples of how that never quite worked out.

The adulteress is named Folly. Get to know her from a distance.

Proverbs 3

What good does it do? What comes from committing your heart to God?

First, Solomon describes what it means to genuinely enter into Covenant with God. We can be amused at the vast popularity of verses 5 and 6 for Bible memorization programs, and how they contradict the assumptions of the people most likely to memorize them. That is, Solomon describes a familial commitment under Eastern feudalism, with an approach to wisdom that denies propositional truth. He refers to the heart as a faculty above the intellect, and truth is beyond proposition. It makes no particular sense on a human level to offer God a tithe of your agricultural produce, yet it guarantees that nature will give you a bigger harvest when you do. Living from the heart is actually healthier, enriching your existence in ways that cannot be counted in your larder.

Solomon mentions how this feudal Father will discipline you as His own child. How could you rebel against someone who so clearly loves you? If there were no measures of discipline, it would only prove you were not standing in His favor.

Solomon again waxes lyrical about Wisdom the Good Woman, your sweetest and most faithful companion. More than all material wealth, make her precious to you. She was there at the moment of Creation, woven into the very fabric of all that exists. This is more of the parable pointing to God's moral character – His Law – as the fundamental nature of reality itself. You dare not lose track of this.

Then we are treated to some examples of how wisdom makes us act in building a stable society. We are quick to share our resources with others in need because they are family. We aren't looking for an excuse to make trouble for anyone; they'll find enough on their own. Don't covet what an evil man gains by his rejection of wisdom. Don't let mere material wealth become a barrier between you and God. We are designed to know His will by instinct, but we must work to keep that instinct in power over our lives. You cannot measure God's favor with mere material prosperity.

Proverbs 4

While we know that Solomon received his unprecedented wisdom as a gift from God at his first wedding (1 Kings 3), Solomon insists a part of his inclination for it came from his father, David. Thus, he reaffirms the critical importance of inter-generational teaching by his own personal example. Sadly enough, his own heir Rehoboam didn't take this advice and lost half his kingdom. However, this serves to reinforce the lesson of at least giving consideration to wisdom from your elders.

Then Solomon asserts in the strongest terms that moral wisdom is the single most important pursuit of humanity. Nothing else in life matters nearly as much as having moral discernment. This kind of wisdom can make you the pinnacle of humanity. Solomon compares it to a smoothly paved highway for your feet. Then he warns against the twisted path of wanton violence. Notice that he does not say all violence is wrong – Solomon was quite the warrior himself, as was his father – but he uses Hebrew idioms for abusive violence. It is like the difference between walking in the light of mid-day versus stumbling around in the darkest night.

He then subtly reemphasizes the importance of learning from his mistakes. We know that Solomon compromised with moral purity because of his numerous marriages and got way off track. So, he warns the generation following him that they don't need to experiment with such folly to see where it leads. We get just a taste of his own bitter regrets here about letting your heart be misled. Watch your mouth and don't be distracted from the straight and narrow.

Proverbs 5

Sometimes wisdom is the result of many painful lessons over a long life. Notice that Solomon doesn't demand that his readers obey simple edicts but offers his own experience. We happen to know that Solomon did have long experience with women – way too many of them. Given his huge harem, there is no reason to suspect Solomon ever chased an adulteress, but there's no doubt he saw enough of it. His warning here includes the full range of his experience and observations together. Keep in mind this is also partly parable about idolatry, and just about any other moral folly that beckons.

Surely Solomon knew that legitimate wives could be trouble enough; no need to complicate things exponentially by borrowing someone else's wife. If she's willing to fool around, there is simply no way any good thing can come of it. You might as well sell yourself as a bond slave. By the time adultery is finished with you, there will be nothing left but pain. You'll be old and have nothing to show for all the work an adulteress will make you do for her. What good does it do to berate yourself when it's too late?

Solomon offers the image of slaking sexual thirst from your own well. He tweaks it just a bit by warning that it would be too easy to pour out all your drinking water into the public sewers. Consider that this is a somewhat drier land where water resources were so precious that whole nations fought and were slaughtered for just a few wells. Treat your own wife as a precious fountain, a rare treat in that land. Stolen water cannot be as sweet.

Don't be a fool; God is watching. He's standing right there, reading your mind while you contemplate sin. If you are under a covenant with Him, you can be sure He will enforce it. It's much easier to repent from things you only imagined you might do, than to clean up the mess from actually doing it.

You cannot build your *shalom* on someone else's turf.

Proverbs 6

It's going to sound like Solomon is beating the same drums over and over. However, it is our cultural insensitivity that keeps us from recognizing that this is a different song. There is a subtle shift in emphasis that is not easily noticed in English translations.

Most of us have experienced a betrayal of trust. Few of us have ever experienced living in a community built on such a high degree of trust as required by the Covenant of Moses. It's not as if biblical morality doesn't recognize a cynical distrust of human nature, but that God designed us to operate in a high trust environment. We are fallen, and a critical element in redemption is learning to value trust.

So, the first section (verses 1-5) of this chapter is actually about a blind business investment. It was anathema to invest in a partnership in which you were not personally involved. A fundamental concept of biblical morality is that you cannot take a profit where you did not invest your own time and effort. Thus, the warning is not simply about co-signing a loan, but an impersonal investment in some business where you cannot watch how your money is used. Did it become blood money, cursed by God? Unless you know for sure, you might as well invest in wanton evil. Solomon says it's worth it to surrender your pride and beg your way out of such a deal, once you realize the nature of things.

The next few verses continue a related theme, suggesting that indirect investment is sheer laziness. You could read it like a sarcastic song, mocking the indolence of someone who expects to profit without doing any work. From there it's just a short step in the next few verses to the sort of immorality that seeks idle entertainment to fill empty days for an empty soul. This is the same sort of person who sees no problem with entertaining themselves at the expense of others. That is, they don't hesitate at sinfully mocking righteousness or simply making fun of misfortune. It's heartless and destroys a community where trust is necessary to survive.

Solomon offers a short list of things God hates in our fallen human natures. First is the sort of arrogance that reflexively views others as dirt. Second is not just deception, but senseless lying over trifles, rather as a habit of mind without bothering to actually calculate whether it matters. Third is the casual disrespect of life – notice this is *innocent* blood, not a just execution of murderous criminals. Fourth is something that translates poorly across the cultural chasm. Keep in mind that Hebrew presumes a sensory heart that guides the mind. Thus, this is the case of reversing that proper order by enslaving the heart to plotting vanity or senseless immorality. Fifth is the related idea of finding perversion so entertaining that it takes priority over other activities. Sixth is someone who will invest significant effort in maintaining a falsehood for any number of selfish motives. Seventh is someone who delights in stirring up destructive drama

between people who are close to each other. We've all met someone who simply cannot tolerate the unconscious guilt of seeing people who actually care about each other, so they destroy anything peaceful because they find soap opera conflicts more entertaining, more "genuine."

Thus, we have a neat little list of predatory immorality that destroys a community. It's a good reminder of the ultimate good in God's moral laws – social stability is a primary meaning of *shalom*. In this context, Solomon goes off on adultery again. It's not just destructive to your own life, but it destroys *shalom* by betraying that essential community trust. It makes you the enemy of God, the covenant community and Creation itself.

Proverbs 7

Solomon has seen it all. While at her pinnacle the Kingdom of Israel was never large enough to be called an empire, she was the single most stable and prosperous nation in a sea of instability. Previous empires had already declined and those not yet born suffered internal chaos. The timing was perfect for a man of unprecedented wisdom and good fortune to draw the attention of numerous foreign powers there at the crossroads of three continents. What he had not seen directly, Solomon learned from the constant flow of traffic seeking his court.

If the New Testament hammers home the message that human sexuality is easily one of the greatest gifts of God, and at the same time, the single greatest threat to personal holiness, the authors learned it from the likes of Solomon. If any man knew such danger, it was the man with far too many wives and concubines. In the midst of this, he still found such a severe threat from adultery that he continues to hammer on it from every possible angle. In this chapter, it's all about the personal weakness to temptation.

He begins by echoing the symbolic references in the Law of Moses about tying God's revelation on your arms and writing it on your forehead. However, Solomon makes the point that if you don't write it on your heart – if you aren't fully committed with a strong moral fiber – all the revelation in the world won't help you. Make God's truth your best friend, he says.

Please note that, while he might imagine he has cause for demeaning women in general, Solomon is careful to confine his repeated warnings to adulterous women. This translates well into the modern recognition of what some behavioral scientists refer to as "hypergammy." While our modern Western culture denies it, women are wired to always seek a better mate. Feminine ambition in nest building is popularly portrayed as an anomaly, as if it's some kind of perversion from the more natural "pure" female instincts. Mosaic Law recognized the truth by building barriers against that very normal instinct. However, with all the strictures, we see that Hebrew society remained relaxed enough for adultery to be a problem.

It's not as if Solomon portrays women as the greater threat to social stability. Rather, it is the difference between how the two sexes threaten *shalom*. It's easy to forget that the Law of Moses came from the mouth of our Creator. It reflects reality as He made it. When it comes to sexual immorality, the biggest problem with men is their passivity. In the Hebrew society, there was a complete absence of the mythology of a man pursuing a woman's favor. Lacking that myth, men are more likely to restrain themselves than women.

Thus, the archetype for adultery is the wily woman seducing a foolish man. Solomon paints a very sharp, detailed portrait of this. As is typical of Hebrew literature, there are elements of hyperbole. Still, the essence of the image rings true, particularly in the final result. In ancient Hebrew society, the man who surrendered to such enticements was doomed in every way. If he wasn't executed outright with her, he became financially liable to the husband. The fool was making himself a slave to the woman and her husband's justified wrath. That his wife was fundamentally the cause didn't change things; it was hardly unknown for a man to marry a loose woman as a social pretense to cover his predatory scheming.

Solomon finally warns his readers to keep their hearts in charge, and not allow the mind and lusts to take control. The mind has no inherent morality and will simply serve to implement whatever the will chooses. If the heart is silenced from its moral awareness, all that's left is mere logic, and that's not enough to keep us from sin. Further, we dare not forget that adultery itself is also an image of idolatry in general. All kinds of sweet temptations can turn into an adulteress-in-effect.

Proverbs 8

On the one hand, this chapter stands on its own. The soaring poetry and utterly accessible metaphor of Lady Wisdom calling to humanity is hard to miss. Every major English translation fails to do it justice, yet even with these feeble attempts, commentary on the narrative seems impotent and futile. It's almost arrogance to try. On the other hand, most people who read it in English are likely to miss the whole point.

Western literary legacy has little that compares with the underlying Hebrew frame of reference here. Solomon assumes a view of reality that is wholly missing from the Western intellectual background. Ours is a bag of materialistic and mechanistic assumptions, and we make no room for a type of intelligence in the heart. We assume the heart is merely a metaphor for emotions and sentiment. For the Hebrew, the heart is a superior intelligence with its own logic, the only proper place to understand morality.

In the Hebrew awareness, as is common with most other Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, Creation remains actively and completely dependent on the whims of the Creator. It's not a clock wound up and allowed to run, but a living thing that requires constant direct attention or it dissolves. God holds all things together by His active and personal involvement. Nothing inherent in Creation is sufficient to maintain integrity and existence on its own. And while God's merest whim alone is sufficient to change things wholesale, we could not know unless He made it a point to allow us to see it happen. However, there is one essential element in all things, and this alone is what gives it consistency: His divine character.

It should seem entirely natural that everything God does reflects directly His personality. He is self-consistent, at least insofar as it means anything to us. Not that we could pretend to estimate such a thing, but we are obliged to accept it. He is a very real Person, but far more complex than any person you meet here below. We give it all kinds of names: wisdom, God's Law, revelation, His character and personality, His divine will, moral discernment, and many more. In a certain sense, they all mean the same thing. It represents the fundamental awareness we must have in

order to understand anything at all the matters. The very fabric of the universe is woven of His personality. Here, Solomon characterizes it with the parable of Lady Wisdom.

You cannot really understand her with your intellect. You can only approach her with your heart reigning over your reason. If you aren't committed in sacrificial love to making her more valuable than life itself, then you cannot have her best gifts. It's all or nothing, in the sense that you receive only what she drops in the mud if she is not your one true love in this life. Granted, Solomon's writing assumes a male audience, but Wisdom herself can translate the imagery for any woman who cares. She was there before Creation, so she transcends the parable that gives her substance for our consideration.

Proverbs 9

Passages like this are the basis for the paradoxes Jesus often used: To him who has wisdom, more shall be given. The obvious point is a matter of human nature. The fundamental quality at issue here is moral sensitivity.

When Lady Wisdom calls, the morally aware will respond. This is life; this is gaining a better grasp on reality. It's sweet and filling to those who live from their hearts instead of from mere intellect. The human mind cannot reason its way to moral truth. Wisdom's banquet of truth feeds the soul through the moral faculty of the heart. Those who are morally insensitive will resent the offer. Implied is the necessity of using harsh law enforcement on such fools. It's enough to tell the morally alert when they have made a mistake, but the morally vacant must be forced to avoid threatening social stability in their heedless rush to satisfy personal lusts.

Contrast this to the whore named Folly. A mere polite invitation won't work for fools. It requires something that appeals to their lower natures, either pain avoidance or pleasure seeking. Folly's home is built on the grave of human sorrow and disaster.

It's not as if all we have to worry about are brazen women. This is the standard Hebrew hyperbole, because ruling wisely is more art than skill. We can take for granted that Solomon's primary audience is those vested with leadership responsibilities. The Hebrew culture presumes that the ideal adult will consistently manifest the shepherd's heart, constantly watching and guarding against threats to moral instability in the community. There is more than one kind of moral seduction.

Part 2

Chapters 10-29 – This is a large collection of proverbs, each requiring some explanation. In this section we will generally quote the proverbs verbatim, followed by an explanation. The Scripture text, as previously noted, is taken from Green's Modern King James Version (MKJV).

Let's take a moment to review a critical concept: A constant source of sorrow for God was the very human tendency to so focus on basic physical appetites that they made no effort to understand the deeper demands of the Covenant. Even in a culture steeped in mysticism such

as the Hebrew, standing in the midst of a whole range of civilizations built on mysticism, there would always be those who lived in their bellies.

The image of wisdom is not simply pragmatism, but of a deep commitment to divine justice. It required a willingness to sacrifice some personal comfort for the sake of conforming with a cosmic moral fabric. It also made ample room for multiple levels of reasoning, with conflicting demands, to arrive at a contextual conclusion as the best manifestation of justice. Very few people of that world could imagine our modern Western preference for linear reasoning and concrete solutions. The very best answer in holy living was often not at all pragmatic as we might view it.

Further, our society tends to disparage the one most important factor in the blessings of God: communal living in extended family households. Even with all the raucous petty disputes typical of Middle Eastern family life, this was a form of social stability we can't easily understand. Yet this is very much what God had in mind when He made people. Thus, we could summarize the ultimate sign of God's favor is social stability, and the ultimate evil is anything that threatens it.

Don't read Western reasoning into these short epigrams. They presume the ultimate good is making God smile, that life cannot be better than His moral favor, regardless what that might mean in practical terms.

Proverbs 10

We begin with an early collection of proverbs Solomon heard or spoke himself. Scripture text is in italics.

1. *A wise son makes a glad father; but a foolish son is the sorrow of his mother.* Whatever sorrows life might bring, children that tend to operate in moral wisdom can make life bearable for their parents. Children who turn out to be self-indulgent jerks make a mother want to hide her face public.
2. *Treasures of wickedness profit nothing; but righteousness delivers from death.* Whatever immoral living buys you isn't worth having. It opens entry ways for demonic presence. Even if there is a significant time lag in the results, don't be fooled. Pay the price for moral living and avoid the traps.
3. *The LORD will not allow the soul of the righteous to go hungry; but He casts away the desire of the wicked.* In Hebrew thought, the "soul" carried a different meaning than Western clinical assumptions. It symbolized the entire experience of life in this world. Embracing Jehovah's revelation offers the best life possible simply because it is the key to understanding how His moral character is woven into all things. Those who ignore His revelation will find themselves ignored, in the sense that they become background noise and mere scenery as His hand works in history. Whatever priorities the wicked hold won't register with God.
4. *He who deals with a lazy hand becomes poor; but the hand of the hard worker makes rich.* The Hebrew word translated "lazy" here implies deceit and moral laxity. This isn't a capitalist maxim

because it's all about morals, not money. Those who ignore the moral meaning of their actions will never have enough, but whatever the righteous gain will seem like a mountain of blessings.

5. *He who gathers in summer is a wise son; but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who causes shame.* We see here a common figure of speech that shows up in Jesus' comment about "white unto harvest" – keep your eyes open to divine opportunities. Don't be fooled by what your mere senses tell you but keep track of the moral order built into Creation. Gird yourself to exert your best efforts when the time comes.

6. *Blessings are on the head of the just; but violence covers the mouth of the wicked.* This is a play on the Hebrew concept of covering. It weaves together the sense of sins removed from God's sight so that He withholds wrath, along with proper submission to divine authority, as well as those He appoints as human authority. It's also a symbol of wealth, power and authority of your own as you operate under God's revelation. You would conspicuously display God's favor and blessings as your "covering." Thus, even the chatter of the morally indigent would ooze with threats to God's provision for life.

7. *The memory of the just is blessed; but the name of the wicked shall rot.* This has nothing to do with official propaganda and our modern social orthodoxy. In the minds of God's faithful people, someone who strives to walk in divine justice will be remembered fondly. Regardless of human accomplishments, anyone who couldn't be bothered with moral character would be remembered with distaste, if remembered at all.

8. *The wise in heart will receive commandments; but a babbling fool shall fall.* Keep in mind that Hebrew culture presumes the heart is the seat of moral discernment, a higher form of awareness than the brain. Thus, a willful commitment to God's moral character means one would listen. But it's a play on words; it also means God will most certainly take time to communicate with that kind of person and promote them in His divine service. Such people were marked by reticence and contemplation. Someone who can't wait to spill the contents of every thought that crosses their minds won't have time to listen to God and He will give them enough rope to hang themselves.

9. *He who walks uprightly walks surely; but he who twists his ways shall be known.* Typical of Hebrew proverbs, this is loaded with puns. It's a play on the image of a man hiking on a path. One who chooses to walk in moral justice will exhibit a strong stride. If he is noticed at all, others will admire him, but he draws no attention to himself. Someone lacking in moral orientation will tend to wander off course and become notorious for getting in the way, for showing up at the worst time and place, etc.

10. *He who winks the eye causes sorrow; but a babbling fool shall fall.* A variation on wording seen previously, we see that context is everything in Hebrew language. This points out two kinds of evil. The first is intentionally ambiguous – either a narrowed squinting of eyes in someone plotting evil or someone using subtle signals to a secret confederate. Either way, they cause everyone else trouble, but the point is the secrecy of their evil plans. At the other extreme is someone who causes trouble largely to himself because he never bothers to keep anything private. Secrecy is generally immoral, but privacy is not.

11. *The mouth of a righteous one is a well of life; but violence covers the mouth of the wicked.* Listen to what people say and observe the moral results. A righteous person is known for making life better because the things they say elicit a more vivid moral clarity. They always have a cool drink for the thirsty soul. It won't matter much what a wicked person says, because their whole orientation is morally destructive.

12. *Hatred stirs up fights, but love covers all sins.* This is another example of common figures of speech, including the concept of moral covering. Identifying people as your enemies will awaken constant warfare. Giving people space to fail, even to the point of shrugging off their expressed hatred for you, will keep conflicts asleep under the covers. Here we see an explicit promotion of social stability.

13. *In the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found; but a rod is for the back of him who is without understanding.* We have a typical Hebrew pun here. The word for "lips" is ambiguous, meaning a part of the facial anatomy, but also the sharp boundary between, say, water and land, or even a linguistic boundary between nations. Wisdom is expected from a man who discerns moral boundaries ("understanding"), and his words tend to reflect that clarity. However, an empty heart ("without understanding") fills the whole being of a fool with ambiguity ("rod" as in branching) and he deserves frequent beatings with a rod.

14. *Wise ones store up knowledge; but the mouth of the foolish is near ruin.* How do you invest your life? Moral wisdom causes you to gather and hold truth, instead of chasing mere material wealth. Again, this implies reticence and contemplation, versus the moral idiot who can't shut up as he pursues mere fleshly comfort and is never far from losing what little his life is worth.

15. *The rich man's wealth is his strong city; the ruin of the poor is their poverty.* Paralleling the previous verse, this is more subtle than it appears. In what do you trust? Whether in literal or some figurative meaning, make the most of what you have. Count your blessings, because if you see yourself as deprived, life isn't worth living.

16. *The labor of the righteous tends to life; the fruit of the wicked tends to sin.* The word "tend" is not in the Hebrew and the ambiguity is intentional. The word translated "labor" implies the wages of such labor. This is as much about moral accounting as anything else. Righteousness is work and its wages purchase a life worth living, while wickedness grows wildly like poisonous fruit that slowly kills you.

17. *He who keeps instruction is in the way of life; but he who refuses reproof goes astray.* Much of the imagery is lost in translation. One who builds a protective hedge around the hard lessons of life learned by bad consequences will walk in God's shadow. When you abandon those lessons and refuse to learn from them, you can't help but wander in moral wilderness, where you can fall off a cliff or be robbed or eaten by wild beasts.

18. *He who hides hatred with lying lips, and he who speaks a slander, is a fool.* If someone is honest in labeling you an enemy, it gives you a chance to seek ways to keep the peace. Someone who seeks to hide his enmity has no interest in keeping the peace. Sooner or later, they'll stir up trouble by what they say about their perceived enemies. This is tied to the folly of imagining

that it's your duty to enforce your personal truth on others, versus the wisdom of "live and let live."

19. *In the multitude of words, sin is not lacking; but he who holds back his lips is wise.* This has nothing to do with a teaching or storytelling. Rather, it refers to how one behaves in social settings. Hebrew language lent itself to expansive ideas expressed through minimal words. The idea was not to nail down precise meanings, but quite the opposite – to encourage contemplation and reflection. Thus, real men of wisdom managed to say a lot with few words. People who rattled on endlessly were usually up to no good. This is actually a proverb encouraging proverbs.

20. *The tongue of the just is as choice silver; the heart of the wicked is worth little.* Almost on the same theme as the previous verse, we have more Hebrew puns. The word translated "tongue" is also a figure of speech for flames as one might see in a foundry, as well as an ingot of metal. Having defined justice as consistency with God's moral character, we should expect even the words of the just to be as precious as silver in covenant life. Again, Hebrew culture saw the heart as the seat of the will and moral discernment, so a moral reprobate can't offer much because his figurative heart is inactive. If you tore his literal heart from his chest, would he miss it?

21. *The lips of the righteous feed many; but fools die for lack of wisdom.* There's a little dry humor in this one. The righteous is the image of a bird feeding nestlings. A fool wouldn't recognize life-giving truth if it bit him.

22. *The blessing of the LORD itself makes rich, and He adds no sorrow with it.* This reminds us not to blame God for our fallen condition. Whatever God grants us is always in our best interests, and whatever is in our best interest always comes from God. His revelation and the blessings bundled with it are our only hope in this life. Blame your fallen nature for any sorrow you experience.

23. *To work out evil devices is as laughter to a fool; so wisdom is to a man of understanding.* Most Westerners miss the point on this one. What amuses you betrays your moral sensibilities, but this isn't about a mere sense of humor. This points at where you invest your energies. There is such a thing as a harmless practical joke, but if you can't empathize with the victim, your prank is harmful and hateful. Fools amuse themselves at the expense of others. Contrast this with someone who is amused by investing his energies in striving to understand God's moral character.

24. *What the wicked fears shall come upon him; but the desire of the righteous shall be granted.* Again, cultural subtlety lost in translation comes into play here. This illustrates what we see in the Eden narrative, that Adam and Eve were no longer willing to meet with God in the Garden after their sin. We shall all face God at the time of His choosing. If we cower from His holiness, His wrath will find us. If we long to see His mercy and grace, He will show us His loving Fatherly face.

25. *As the storm passes, so the wicked is no more; but the righteous is an everlasting foundation.* The context is not secular life in general, but life under the Covenant. For inscrutable reasons, God may grant a season of sorrow allowing the wicked to hold power. However, within a covenant

life, such will pass briefly. Those who seek God's moral character will establish a presence that outlasts their own span of life.

26. *Like vinegar to the teeth, and like smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.* This has a dual message. Don't trust someone who can't be bothered to care about your wishes. By the same token, don't be a self-centered jerk or you might find yourself out of a job.

27. *The fear of the LORD prolongs days; but the years of the wicked shall be shortened.* Again, the context is within the Covenant. However, you should recognize the subjective element that does matter in moral reckoning. When you embrace God's revelation and His Lordship as if He were your feudal master, however much life He grants seems plenty. The concept of longevity also indicates fullness in other senses. On the other hand, if you are trying to game the system for your appetites, you'll always believe you were short-changed.

28. *The hope of the righteous is gladness; but the hope of the wicked shall perish.* Essentially this is a restatement of the previous verse, with another play on words. The righteous patiently awaits, sight unseen, what he believes God will grant, persisting in hope for joy. The wicked is reasonably certain he'll get what he wants by his scheming, but it will wander off and die.

29. *The way of the LORD is strength to the upright; but ruin is to the workers of iniquity.* The translation misses something. If your habitual path is a life adhering to God's revelation, that life itself is a mighty fortress. If you give yourself to any other moral system, your life will be a moral shambles, like the dusty rubble of a crushed castle.

30. *The righteous shall never be moved; and the wicked shall not live in the earth.* This restates the previous verse. Righteous moral orientation makes your life stable, but moral indolence leaves you rootless.

31. *The mouth of the just brings forth wisdom; but the perverse tongue shall be cut out.* We have here another case of double intention. People should seek wise men of moral strength; speak wisely and people will listen. Don't tolerate someone who prattles folly; blather like an idiot and no one will take you seriously.

32. *The lips of the righteous know what is pleasing; but the mouth of the wicked what is contrary.* Yet again, this parallels the previous verse. Here, what is "pleasing" pleases God, and by implication should please the Covenant People. You can detect wickedness by talk that perverts revelation.

Proverbs 11

We begin to see a more frequent grouping of proverbs by common themes.

1. *False balances are hateful to the LORD; but a just weight is His delight.* While the literal meaning is obvious, the symbolic meaning is the same as in the West. Justice itself in the broadest sense is represented as measuring against a consistent standard. People who consistently measure things against the moral character of God will find His favor.

2. *Pride comes, then shame comes; but with the lowly is wisdom.* This continues the theme of the previous verse. Arrogant presumption is not the same as confidence; it is overconfidence, out of

proportion. People might not see the difference at first, but the longer-term results will show what God favors. Not so much in worldly results, but in how the heart can detect moral confusion by the actions of the arrogant. Those who don't take themselves so seriously are less likely to lock themselves into an untenable position.

3. *The integrity of the upright shall guide them; but the crookedness of traitors shall destroy them.* A bit of punning here that doesn't translate well, this proverb contrasts the image of one who never bothers to deceive or hide things against that of someone who is always sneaking around and trying to take advantage of others. The central element is trust that arises not from mere simplicity, but of carefully structured behavior that always makes plain what others should expect from you.

4. *Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.* The imagery is hard to translate. The image is not wealth itself, but wealth that one did not work hard to attain. Wealth that comes too easily robs one of moral character. It won't matter what you have when you face God's wrath, but whether His moral justice owns you.

5. *The righteousness of the perfect shall make his way right, but the wicked shall fall by his own wickedness.* Life is likened to a journey. The word translated "perfect" indicates "what you ought to be." A proper moral consciousness and living from the heart will make hazards obvious and easy to avoid. Moral weakness will make you stumble.

6. *The righteousness of the upright shall deliver them, but deceivers shall be taken in lust.* The primary image is what you allow to control your decisions. What grabs you and drives you? Good moral character will snatch you away from harm, but moral confusion will drag you down into harm.

7. *When a wicked man dies, his hope shall perish; and the hope of evil ones shall be lost.* Death in Hebrew culture was a symbol for anything that threatened or shook your life around; we might say a rough ride. The first word translated "hope" is the image of commitment, something on which one depends, rather like a seatbelt. The second "hope" is the image of what one waits for, a cause for patient endurance. Without moral character, you'll set your hopes on things that cannot possibly come.

8. *The righteous is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked comes in his place.* This restates the previous verse in different terms. To give the flavor of the Hebrew words, here we see that moral wisdom will pull a man out of a tight spot. Meanwhile, silencing your heart and living by lesser human reasoning will let you inherit his place in that tight spot.

9. *A hypocrite corrupts his neighbor with his mouth; but through knowledge the just shall be delivered.* The Hebrew here asks us to picture someone who invades your social gatherings without bothering to wash his clothes or even bathe, yet pretends that he fits right in. He's a windbag with halitosis that could kill an ox, or perhaps it's his morals that reek. Your only defense is skillfully avoiding this beast.

10. *When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices; and when the wicked are destroyed, there is singing.* On the one hand, we know the Hebrew mythos celebrated the simple life in tents. However, a vivid community life often resulted in building some few permanent structures, and it required serious skill and engineering wisdom to build in that rocky, hilly terrain. Thus,

the image of a city is something with justified multi-generation investment for the good of the people. It is this long-term view where one expects to see God bless the righteous and punish the wicked. A city worth living in will tend to celebrate those long-term outcomes.

11. *By the blessing of the upright the city is lifted up, but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked.* This extends the thought in the previous proverb. The blessing of any one morally upright person is a benefit to everyone in the community, but the wretched chatter of a morally filthy windbag will knock things down.

12. *One despising his friend lacks heart, but a man of understanding remains silent.* This is a forceful assertion that the heart is the seat of moral discernment. If you do not subject your mind to your heart, then you simply are not really alive. A primary symptom of a dead heart is an untamed mouth. An active heart of wisdom tends to make you talk less. This symbolizes the high value of contemplation in Hebrew culture.

13. *One going with slander is a revealer of secrets, but the faithful of spirit keeps the matter hidden.* We are presented with the image of a gossip who invests some energy and effort in keeping track of everyone's private business, not by going to the source, but gathering worthless scraps of false impressions. It constitutes verbal violence, ripping someone else's clothes off in public for the sake of perverse entertainment. This contrasts with someone who genuinely cares and keeps his mouth shut.

14. *Where there is no wisdom, the people fall; but in the multitude of wise men there is safety.* Wisdom is depicted as ropes that bind things together tightly. The ideal community is where there are plenty of people who live by their hearts filled with good moral discernment. The implication is that moral education is more precious than just about any other investment you can make for the future of your nation.

15. *He who is surety for a stranger shall be ruined; and he who hates suretyship is safe.* This is another case of losing much in translation. It's not considered a loan if you invest in the dreams of family member; it's an investment of love and trust even if the money is lost. Investing in the business of someone outside your community is worse than gambling. Our Western concepts of contract and investment are torn to shreds here as violating God's moral law.

16. *A gracious woman keeps honor, and the strong keep riches.* This one is a little ambiguous and often mistranslated. The image is not a contrast between men and women, but a woman who either acts like a lady or tries to compete with men. A woman who lives consistently with God's revelation about gender roles will "feed what should be fat" – she'll make life worth living. If she tries to act more like a plundering soldier, she might have money, but who wants to go home to her?

17. *The merciful man does good to his own soul, but he who is cruel troubles his own flesh.* This flips the previous proverb over to the man's role. This builds on the image of conforming to holiness as pulling yourself up into the higher realm of moral consideration and being able to see what God intended in Creation. Your life is consistent with reality itself in the subtlest ways, as well as the more obvious pieties. Such a man is merciful, mindful of human frailty because he sees his own

failures with full clarity. Harsh and demanding men destroy themselves, pushing far away from how reality actually works. It's a very unhealthy existence.

18. *The wicked makes a deceitful wage; but one sowing righteousness has a sure reward.* Fundamental to the definition of good morals is living with your heart supervising your mind. The heart in Hebrew culture was the place where God speaks. To live by human talents alone is calling God a liar; it is wickedness defined. God is the ultimate master of wages and pays according to whether your heart belongs to Him.

19. *So righteousness tends to life; but one pursuing evil, it is to his own death.* English translators often spoil things by adding words they imagine are implied; forget the "tends" here. Good moral character simply lives; it is life defined. There's nothing to chase after because the truth is right there in front of you. Rest in God and trust Him to show you. If you feel like you have to work all that hard and chase the truth down, you won't find it. You'll find death in the broadest meaning.

20. *They who are of a perverse heart are hateful to the LORD, but the upright in the way are His delight.* To whatever your heart is committed, that will you do. If by your mind you interfere with the proper functioning of the moral intelligence in your heart, you will pervert your commitments. Those who build commitments consistent with God's revealed purpose will find those commitments let them stand firmly in His favor.

21. *Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be innocent; but the seed of the righteous shall be delivered.* More subtlety that escapes translation, we see the image of worldly men who ignore revelation joining hands like an army intending to stand against the truth. As with the Tower of Babel, they expect to build their own version of truth by their human abilities. But when the wrath of God comes, their fruit will be picked clean. They'll have nothing to show for it. For those who embrace revelation, their fruit – as the source of seeds – will be saved in God's pantry.

22. *Like a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a beautiful woman who turns aside discretion.* Keep in mind that pigs were ritually unclean, detestable animals driven out into the wilderness. They had to hide out along the banks of wet places to survive in Israel. Who can bear the thought of getting close enough to one to fit it with any kind of animal control device, much less one made of gold? This shocking waste is just about what we might think when we encounter a woman who looks ravishing and has no sense of moral beauty to match.

23. *The desire of the righteous is only good; the hope of the wicked is wrath.* In Hebrew, the words for "desire" and "hope" here are conceptually very close. Both indicate a form of attachment. However, in the odd manner of terse Hebrew, it's not meant to suggest that wicked people actually hope for wrath, but that the object of their affection guarantees wrath.

24-25. *There is one who scatters and yet increases; but one who withholds just due comes only to poverty. The soul who gives freely shall be made fat; and he who waters shall also be watered himself.* This is a typical paradox. Within a covenant community, those who freely distribute whatever God has given them only make room for Him to give more. There's nothing wrong with holding back things God says are reserved for some other purpose, but to be a tightwad guarantees God

cannot give you more. Mercy and grace are like muscles that grow with use. The second line is just another way of saying the same thing.

26. *He who withholds grain, the people shall curse him; but blessing is on the head of him who sells.* This extends the idea in the previous two verses. God gives material wealth so that you can experience the joy of sharing. Again, the context is a covenant community where everyone is family.

27. *He who carefully seeks good gets favor; but he who seeks mischief, it shall come to him.* The image here is someone who gets up early to pursue what's just and right in God's Creation. This is not a contradiction to verse 19 above, but another way of looking at the same thing. If you take seriously God's command to seek social stability ("good"), you should expect favor in general. This is contrasted with someone whose habits lead away from social stability; God will make sure their lives are unstable.

28. *He who trusts in his riches shall fall; but the righteous shall blossom like a branch.* It's the contrast between spring and fall seasons. If material wealth is your god, then your life is autumnal in the worst sense of cold and dry, brown and drab. Those who place a high value on divine justice, even at the cost of material wealth, are living in eternal spring, always renewing and rejoicing.

29. *He who troubles his own house shall inherit the wind; and the fool shall be servant to the wise in heart.* What will you inherit? This is all about family loyalty, a prime virtue in Scripture. In this case, making trouble means creating a moral disturbance. Wait until you are in charge to demand changes, or you won't have anything to inherit. You'll end up a poor starving wretch, serving someone who did wait his turn.

30. *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he who wins souls is wise.* The subtle Hebrew context here has nothing to do with the sales-pitch evangelism of modern Western church growth tactics. That can be faked entirely. The fundamental image here is more the focus of your life as a whole, the sense of what drives you in all things. We are building Life with a capital "L" – seeking to tie our existence here with Eternity. If your ambition is the souls of people, then your harvest is rich, indeed.

31. *Behold, the righteous shall be rewarded in the earth; much more the wicked and the sinner.* There is a forceful assertion here in the first line. We all know that a proper moral focus is otherworldly, but it is also the most practical approach because it is consistent with how the universe operates. However much good you can have in this life is found on that path. How much more so the bad that comes to the wicked? Whatever they gain in this life is all they have.

Proverb 12

We start to see a number of proverbs that appear little more than statements of obvious fact. These are most likely figures of speech meant to apply quite broadly as parables of something deeper.

1. *Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge; but he who hates correction is like a brute animal.* The first form of instruction implies correction, while the second implies something more forceful

and severe. An ancient proverb suggests that learning and pain are common companions, so if you make them your ally, you understand how reality works – knowledge here is more like cunning or sharpness. Act as if such things are your enemy and you will be more like a stupid cow.

2. *The good gets grace from the LORD, but He will condemn a man of wicked thoughts.* The image is how a sheikh handles his servants. Someone who actually serves the Lord's interest will be provided with everything he needs for the mission, including the favor of God. This is favor as a badge or ensign that others can see. The servant who is constantly looking for his own advantage is the definition of corrupt, and can expect Jehovah to denounce him, the make an example of him.

3. *A man shall not be established by wickedness, but the root of the righteous shall not be moved.* This repeats the previous proverb in different terms. You can't become a valued and important member of the divine court if you don't embrace the divine moral character. However, the one who clings to justice is strongly rooted in reality.

4. *A woman of virtue is a crown to her husband, but she who causes shame is like rottenness in his bones.* Again, carrying forward the same thoughts as the previous two verses, the standard image of a family household is that of the Ancient Near Eastern feudal clan. As a man's senior manager, his wife is his greatest asset, rather like a ruler's elite bodyguard troops. There is nothing wrong with a woman who knows where to aim her feisty side, making outsiders hesitant to mess with his property. But a woman who turns her nasty side to her husband, and shames him in social situations, is like cancer that withers away his life.

5. *The thoughts of the righteous are right; the counsels of the wicked are deceit.* This appears rather obvious in English, but the flavor doesn't come across well from the Hebrew. The point is that God judges intentions, not so much the ability to act nor the outcomes. That was the reason for the sacrificial system, to demonstrate moral intent, a proper sorrow that things don't always come out right. The "thoughts" of the righteous indicates more than mere intellectual activity, but a sense of commitment to God's revelation. The intentions of others are fraudulent by nature.

6. *The words of the wicked are to lie in wait for blood; but the mouth of the upright shall deliver them.* This presents words and mouth as symbols of what's in the heart, rather like the phrase, "the Word of the Lord." It indicates an expressed intent as if one were issuing covenant law to a vassal. The law by which the wicked live is predatory, lurking to harm. The conduct of the righteous, reflecting their decree to themselves, will keep them out of trouble.

7. *The wicked are overthrown, and are gone; but the house of the righteous shall stand.* This continues the theme of each of us living by our own chosen law in the little kingdoms, the limited dominion granted by God in each of our lives. There is a delicious ambiguity in the word "overthrown," as it means both perverted and destroyed. But God long remembers the testimony of those whose exercise of dominion served His honor.

8. *A man shall be praised according to his wisdom, but he who is of a perverse heart shall be despised.* The first line is actually ambiguous, referring to how one's public honor from God matches the

quality of his wisdom. However, there comes a point when it's not a question of quality but fundamental orientation. Thus, the perverse will curry God's despite.

9. *Better is a despised one, and having a servant, than he honoring himself and lacks bread.* This is another figure of speech about how we run our personal domains. If God prospers our actions (wealthy enough to own slaves), it won't matter what other people think of us. But fame means nothing if God beggars your existence.

10. *A righteous one understands the soul of his animal; but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.* There are better translations for this one. God created all things and made us managers over Creation. In our fallen state, we exercise that authority quite poorly, but it remains in our hands to some degree (according to the Covenant of Noah). So, someone who seeks God's moral character will acknowledge his domestic animals as creatures from God's hand and take due care and responsibility for their lives. The contrast of "tender mercies" found its way into English long ago with the same sarcasm reflected here.

11. *He who tills his land shall be satisfied with bread; but he who follows vanities lacks heart.* Here we have more of the contrast between good and evil in terms of exercising dominion. This is mostly figure of speech: Stick with what God has called you to do. Whatever this brings you will fill your soul. Stop chasing stuff that appeals to your ego, because it only proves your heart is empty of any meaningful commitment.

12. *The wicked desires the net of evils; but the root of the righteous yields fruit.* A parallel to the previous proverb, this is related to another ancient proverb that says you don't go hunting or fishing when it's time to plant or harvest. The wicked "desire" here is the image of obsession over some ethereal vision of joy, in this case a preference for wasting time with predatory schemes. Stay home and take care of things in their season and you'll never lack.

13. *The wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips, but the just shall come out of trouble.* Another parallel, this proverb builds on the image of hooking or snaring. It also carries some humor – the phrase "transgression of his lips" could also be read "trespassing boundaries." Thus, the wicked keep intruding where they'll be trapped, but the righteous keep escaping the tight spots in life. Not just as an individual, this is the image of someone trying to move their entire household of people, herds and wagons.

14. *A man shall be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth, and the reward of a man's hands shall be given to him.* This proverb rests on seeing the dramatic imagery. As before, speech is more at expressing one's personal moral code of law. We see the humor of what comes out of your mouth is the fruit you can eat to your full, and what you give with your hands is the payment returned to your hands. The Lord fills our lives in the same measure as our obedience to Him.

15. *The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, hut he who listens to advice is wise.* Here we have contrasted the image of someone who listens only to the demands of their flesh, versus someone who learns from others. The ultimate aim of revelation is to build a cooperative and civilized community, not a bunch of wildly competitive idiots seeking some advantage over others. Israel had encountered several societies that made constant competition a virtue. It's hard to explain

the fundamental difference in the concept of wisdom here with the Ancient Near Eastern concept of virtue and civility against the false assumptions of Western societies.

16. *A fool's vexation is known in a day, but the astute one covers shame.* Related to the previous proverb, this one emphasizes the hasty overreaction of fools versus the patient consideration of the wise.

17. *He who breathes truth shows forth righteousness, but a false witness deceit.* A mark of righteousness is honesty, someone who speaks according to reality. Don't trust someone who is willing to deceive for any reason.

18. *There are those who speak like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise heals.* More of the previous verse, the imagery in this one has found its way into English figures of speech. It's not a question of anyone's feelings, but of how we respond to the troubles of others and the net result of how we talk.

19. *The lips of truth shall be established forever, but only while I wink is a lying tongue.* Aside from this being a clumsy translation, this is far more subtle than is apparent in English. If your words (and actions) are consistent with reality as God declares it, if your personal law conforms to God's personal justice, then you have been captured by Eternity. Deception is quite ephemeral (lasting about as long as "while I wink") and will be wiped away when God redeems His Creation.

20. *Deceit is in the heart of those who imagine evil, but to counselors of peace there is joy.* More subtlety, we have a contrast between those who pursue excitement, drama and personal amusement versus those who seek *shalom* – social stability and the blessings of God's revelation.

21. *No evil shall happen to the just, but the wicked shall be filled with mischief.* This paints the picture of someone who seeks wholeheartedly God's divine justice, such that vanity or loss can't stand to be around them. Such things keep their distance. By contrast, those who can't be bothered to worry about justice will not only see calamity approach, but this fool will swallow it all down like a feast.

22. *Lying lips are hateful to the LORD, but those who deal truly are His delight.* While we have no problem understanding the words here, we miss the full impact in our Western culture. Those who trust God have no use for deception even against their own enemies. The miraculous hand of God will not accompany those who use deception for any reason. All the more so is this true within a covenant community.

23. *A wise man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools cries out foolishness.* This fills out the picture with the previous verse. Honesty is not a question of blabbering about every thought that crosses your mind. It's not deception to keep private matters private. We might not see it in quite the same terms as the ancient Hebrews, but minding your own business was roughly equivalent to contemplating in prayer instead of acting hastily.

24. *The hand of the hard worker shall bear rule, but the lazy shall be under service.* The Hebrew translated "hard worker" here carries the image of both diligent and decisive. That is, if you are persistent, you'll eventually know what you are doing. If you can't be bothered with it, you'll

end up working for someone else just to pay off your debts – it's the image of tribute owed to one who conquers your domain.

25. *Heaviness in the heart of man makes it stoop, but a good word makes it glad.* Most Westerners miss this one. It's not at all a matter of how someone feels emotionally, but it's a matter of having a confused or fearful conviction in the heart. Commitment from anxiety is burdensome, but a word of mercy that delivers from such confusion can really set someone free.

26. *The righteous is more excellent than his neighbor, but the way of the wicked seduces them.* Another case of subtle imagery that is hard to translate, the words here picture the difference in the kind of guidance folks offer. It's the contrast between exploring and gaining a firm contextual understanding of your local terrain so that you can guide others versus the confused wandering of some fool who keeps trying to cut a new path and forgets to mark it. The latter makes everyone stumble. Which of these will be more helpful to his kinfolks ("neighbors")?

27. *The lazy one does not start after his game, but the wealth of a hard worker is precious.* We have no cultural equivalent for the figure of speech here. It's not really a matter of mere food, but how one handles life in general. It's the difference between someone who is too lazy to make up his mind what really matters versus someone who is determined to find the moral treasures of this life.

28. *In the way of righteousness is life, and in that pathway there is no death.* This one is actually rather majestic in simplicity. We have two different terms for a well-established route, something that has been in use since before human memory. If you walk in holiness, the divine justice God revealed, then you will experience a vivid life as He intended, sweet and rich. Even if your expiration comes early, you won't consider it death.

Proverbs 13

1. *A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a scorner does not hear rebuke.* The Western approach makes this a matter of inflated reverence, even fearfulness, for the government or for society outside of the covenant. Hebrew folks were not like that; there is no presumption that every word of your male parent is sacred wisdom. The issue here is between heeding revelation and simply trusting in your own intelligence and reason. The father in this proverb symbolizes a commitment to social stability (*shalom*) within the Covenant. Arrogant fools never listen to anyone because they don't care about social moral stability.

2. *From the fruit of his mouth a man shall eat good, but the soul of the treacherous eats violence.* Jesus restated this: It's not what you put in your mouth that defiles you, but what comes out of your mouth, because it represents what's in your heart. The ancient proverb Solomon cites here is meant to make you smile with the paradoxical image that your own righteous words will feed you. This is contrasted with someone who acts covertly and treacherous, whose life is focused on oppression, both giving and receiving.

3. *He who keeps his mouth keeps his life; he who opens his lips wide, it is ruin to him.* Keeping in mind that the mouth is two-way, this proverb promotes introspection. Be aware of what you but in

your body and what you absorb into your soul. If you don't discriminate according to the Word of God, you have no say at all in what happens.

4. *The soul of the sluggard desires and has nothing; but the soul of the hard worker shall be made fat.*

There are few things more evil in this world than a sense of entitlement. This isn't merely hedonistic laziness, but the sense that life is supposed to be easy and carefree. It's an attitude that denies the Curse of the Fall. People who realize that God requires us to put some effort into this life will receive the promised blessings.

5. *The righteous hates lying, but the wicked one is odious and acts shamefully.* This is mangled some by traditional translation. In Hebrew, it begins with the subject: a word of deception. This is far more than lying, but symbolizes a life of deception, either by design or through lack of one. Against this kind of thing, the righteous man has declared himself the enemy. This is a noble image – the shepherd of souls on watch. It contrasts with the unrighteous man who is a craven coward, unwilling to sacrifice anything so that he is a threat to the community.

6. *Righteousness guards the perfect of way, but wickedness subverts sin.* This is a visual contrast: traveling through life with a faithful bodyguard versus wandering about at the end of the slave chain held by some demon. Embracing God's moral character sets you free from Satan's dominion.

7. *There are those who act rich, yet have nothing; and those who act poor, yet have great riches.* This is the classic contrast between arrogance and humility. As such, it serves as a sharp rebuke to the Western middle-class materialism, and the pretense of ostentatious wealth and position. The truly noble can afford to act humbly.

8. *The ransom of a man's life is his riches, but the poor does not hear rebuke.* This connects to the previous proverb. We have here a figure of speech that translates poorly into English. When you are rich and people know it, you find yourself facing a lot of hassles. Everywhere you turn, people are eager to find ways to take your stuff. If you are obviously poor, no one seems to notice you.

9. *The light of the righteous rejoices, but the lamp of the wicked shall be put out.* There is a delicious contrast in the words used for light here. The righteous have natural light, rather like the sun, moon and stars. Nature favors them and they rejoice in moral purity. The wicked are lucky to have a flickering lamp against the darkness of their lives.

10. *Only by pride comes argument, but with those who take advice is wisdom.* Something subtle Westerners miss here is the difference between mere intellectual logic and wisdom from ancient revelation. The word for "argument" points to the arrogance of human talent as the grounds of inquiry into issues of this life. The second line does not exclude contentious debate. To "take advice" emphasizes the difference in standing on the ground of moral wisdom when hearing all the arguments.

11. *Wealth gotten by vanity shall be taken away, but he who gathers by labor shall increase.* The symbolism here actually continues the previous verse. We can see the obvious literal meaning that folks who are born to privilege could easily become profligate wasters of their wealth, while those who work hard for their prosperity are more cautious about how they spend it. This

also points out that those born brilliant tend to waste their talent on whatever amuses them, often due to the feeling that lesser lights of intellect aren't worth helping. Someone who works hard to humbly approach wisdom does so with the assumption that respect for God's command to bless others is the beginning of wisdom.

12. *Hope put off makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life.* By itself, this proverb seems to say something too obvious. In the context of previous verses, this serves to warn those who lead not to make inflated promises.

13. *Whoever despises the word shall be destroyed, but he who fears the commandment shall be rewarded.* This proverb paints the image of self-restraint. If you don't bind yourself under the Word, you'll be bound by its penalties. If you revere the Law, you will be free from fear and blessed by God.

14. *The law of the wise is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death.* This is the previous verse restated in different words. Most readers are surprised that the expression "water of life" comes right out the Old Testament.

15. *Good understanding gives favor, but the way of traitors is ever flowing.* A clumsy translation here; "ever flowing" should be more like "hard as stone" – it's the image of difficulty, something with no give. The implication is aimed at moral existence, not mere material comfort. Treachery is the hardest existence serving the worst master of all – your fallen flesh. Under the Covenant, the blessings of God arise from taking seriously the duty to moral purity; it makes you adaptable and ready for anything.

16. *Every wise one deals with knowledge, but a fool lays open his folly.* In this context, "deals with" translates a Hebrew word that implies maintenance, as in keeping an operation together. In contrast, a fool runs everything into the ground, scattering the parts everywhere.

17. *A wicked messenger falls into mischief, but a faithful ambassador is health.* The word "mischief" implies a wide range of misfortune, into which an immoral messenger might stumble on a regular basis. People with poor moral orientation are always prone to get sidetracked into business that threatens the message. Someone focused on the mission solves problems and make his master glad for one less hassle.

18. *Poverty and shame shall be to him who refuses instruction, but he who listens to correction shall be honored.* When you stand before God and live under the Covenant, you can expect His wrath to fall on those who can't be bothered with self-restraint. God regards the honor of those who take criticism well as a reflection of His own glory.

19. *The desire fulfilled is sweet to the soul, but it is hateful to fools to turn from evil.* Living contrary to divine justice was often viewed as an addiction, a form of slavery that kept you under God's wrath. The "desire fulfilled" is the broader call to divine justice, a challenging path of self-restraint that builds up a community. As the moral climate in the community improves, fools start to whine about their lost opportunities to indulge their lusts.

20. *He who walks with the wise shall be wise, but a companion with fools shall be destroyed.* Even in English vernacular there's humor in breaking the rhythm. This is roughly equivalent to: Walk with the wise and you'll be wise; walk with fools and you'll be dead.

21. *Evil pursues sinners, but to the righteous good shall be repaid.* This paints the image of sinners hounded by moral calamity, just like creditors pursue a debtor. Contrast that with the righteous who stand safely with their just recompense secured.

22. *A good man leaves an inheritance to his sons' sons, and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just.* This is a very old proverbial image. It's a seed concept; when allowed to blossom it offers the implication that we pass to our children our moral legacy. A sinner's children can repent on their own, but demonic presence is not so easily dismissed when it has been allowed to build a fort in your family life.

23. *Much food is in the plowed ground of the poor, but when there is no justice, it is swept away.* This is an obscure way of saying the same as the previous verse. You can be poor, but God grants us all a powerful opportunity ("plowed ground" as yet unplanted) to leave a strong moral legacy. If you don't exploit the situation for God's glory by living in His justice, everything you could have built would be just an empty dream.

24. *He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him chastens him early.* This has passed into English an abbreviated form: Spare the rod and spoil the child. But the image in our Western heritage is ugly and harsh. Whereas, in the Hebrew it was merely a symbol of giving moral context and shape to your child's world in the sense of holding a ruling scepter of strong authority, not merely a weapon for inflicting pain. There's a pun here because "rod" could also mean "branch" as in a son.

25. *The righteous eats to the satisfying of his soul, but the belly of the wicked shall lack.* If you focus on your moral duty under the Covenant, God takes care of the promise to provide reasonable prosperity, including food. This is feeding your entire self, with all the various faculties God gave us. Moral weakness leads to a very debased existence, a lustful living that is never satisfied.

Proverbs 14

Solomon's theme here seems a matter of building a just and holy life.

1. *A wise woman builds her house, but the foolish plucks it down with her hands.* Back when Israel lived in tents, it was an ancient custom that the women would set up the family tent. It was very much *her* tent and her domain, though we should expect that servants and children, and perhaps even the husband, would set it up under her personal supervision. The implication here is taking responsibility for domestic operations. The wider effects of her actions can also serve to tear down the very thing she claims to build.

2. *He who walks in his uprightness fears the LORD, but he who is perverse in his ways despises Him.* The term for "upright" here is a Hebrew word meaning "contextually just." The assertion is an equivalence, applying both ways. So is the opposite. The image is one who walks around the potholes on the highway versus one who wanders completely off the path.

3. *In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride, but the lips of the wise shall keep them.* The usual Hebrew pun, this compares a stick with a hedge. By your own folly will your arrogant words provide

the ammunition for your correction, but observing wise boundaries (“lips”) in your speech will provide a hedge of protection.

4. *Where no cattle are, the stall is clean, but much gain is by the strength of the ox.* This is no different from the modern, “You can’t have it both ways.” A simple life can be pure and clean, like the vacant stall and feed trough. But if you need stuff, it requires doing the extra work of having the means of production. An ox can pull the plow for you and it’s far more productive than pulling your own plow, but by implication it’s still a lot of work.

5. *A faithful witness will not lie, but a false witness will speak lies.* What comes out of your mouth reflects what’s in your heart. The image is one who speaks carefully, trying to get the truth across, versus one whose very breath (“speak” as in blowing) is the stink of deception.

6. *A scorner seeks wisdom, and it is not found, but knowledge is easy to him who understands.* Wisdom is invisible to a blind heart. A discerning heart has no trouble recognizing what God intended in any given situation.

7. *Go from the before a foolish man when you do not see in him the lips of knowledge.* Give people time to manifest their inner nature, but as soon as you discern there is nothing you can do to help someone, stop trying. The image is taking up a position on the opposite side from the fool.

8. *The wisdom of the wise is to understand his way, but the folly of fools is deceit.* Wise people keep an eye on the road ahead and keep trying to move in the right direction. Fools spend all their time in trying to pull people off that path.

9. *Fools laugh at sin, but among the righteous there is favor.* This continues the theme of the previous verse. Mocking the idea that some choices are inherently sinful serves to sidetrack people from the Covenant call. Looking beyond the sophistry of semantic wrangling about the Law and keeping your eye on the moral purpose of revelation delights God, and by implication, all of Creation celebrates.

10. *The heart knows its own bitterness, and a stranger does not share in its joy.* This is an ancient figure of speech that is more subtle than the words indicate. On the one hand, only you and God can really understand what He exposes to the “mind” of your heart. Your personal sense of fallen nature and repentance is uniquely yours in the Presence of God. However, the joy of redemption can be shared, but not with someone who doesn’t share a common moral commitment to the Covenant.

11. *The house of the wicked shall be overthrown, but the tent of the upright shall be blessed.* Picturesque imagery here points to the apparent well-planned life of those who reject a higher moral understanding, painting it as a solid stone house. But the storms of life will destroy such a life because it is built in defiance of Creation’s own moral fabric. Meanwhile, those morally upright could face the worst sorrows of life in a mere tent and still be standing when it’s all done.

12. *There is a way which seems right to a man, but the end of it is the ways of death.* This is a direct slam on trusting in human talent and intelligence to work out the mysteries of our existence. Reason alone is not enough; it’s a dead-end road.

13. *Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that joy is heaviness.* We have another sample of intentional ambiguity common in Hebrew reasoning. It depends on the context. Life in this fallen realm is painful by default. You can laugh uproariously and try to ignore it, or you can chuckle and make the most of it, but you cannot change the fundamental nature of the Fall.

14. *The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways, but a good man from himself.* This is the essence of reaping what you sow. The word “backslider” is the image of someone who flinches when things get tough, so they always come up short of what they could have had from God’s blessings.

15. *The simple believes every word, but the wise man watches his step.* This is about holy cynicism. It’s not merely a question of whether you are going to obey guidance from ambitious fools who happen to hold authority over you; it’s much more than that. It’s a matter of discerning the moral results of what self-appointed experts are trying to sell and preparing in your heart to handle the outcome.

16. *A wise one fears and departs from evil, but the fool rages and is sure.* This echoes the previous verse. At the earliest opportunity a wise person bails out on folly, but the fool loudly convinces himself that he’s a good member of the team – but the wrong team.

17. *He who is soon angry acts foolishly, and a man of wicked plots is hated.* What difference does it make if you are impulsively stupid or just plain evil? You can apologize for your hasty mistakes, but you can’t apologize for rejecting moral truth. There is no sacrifice to cover moral rebellion against God.

18. *The simple inherit folly, but the wise are crowned with knowledge.* We’ve all met people who believe life can be managed with simple rules and buying into some logical scheme for prosperity. It’s a lot more work to become well acquainted with the moral fabric of reality. You must keep checking yourself against that divine mirror. Reality itself is a living and moving thing, so the job is never done until life is done.

19. *The evil bow before the good, and the wicked at the gates of the righteous.* An example of Hebrew parallelism, we know this is not literal, but a figure of speech. When God’s wrath moves in the world, the only refuge is in the shadow of those who welcome His wrath as a cleansing blessing.

20. *The poor is hated even by his own neighbor, but the rich has many friends.* Typical Hebrew sarcasm and wit, we know that people get tired of the perpetual needy beggar. People will avoid them, so they get to spend a lot of time alone. But if you are rich, you’ll never have a moment to yourself. Solitude is expensive one way or another.

21. *He who despises his neighbor sins, but he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he.* A response to the previous verse: On the other hand, if you can’t understand the blessings of family and community, even at the cost of supporting them, you’ll never have much blessing from God. Thus, joy is also expensive, but worth the cost.

22. *Do not those who think evil go astray? But mercy and truth shall be to those who think of good.* This paints the image of thinking in terms of devising and making plans. If your plans are contrary to the moral character of God, they’ll keep changing and never quite work out. This is typical of

people with some rarefied vision of whatever human logic can produce, always bent on something surely possible, if only they can avoid having their plans spoiled by someone who doesn't quite get it. And of course, such people are always saddled with idiots because smart people don't swallow their grand schemes. If your plans are to bring God glory and respond to His whims, you can expect His mercy and stability ("truth").

23. *In all labor there is gain, but the talk of the lips tends only to poverty.* This is simple enough: Walk the talk. If all you are working is your jaws, nothing will come of it.

24. *The crown of the wise is their riches of wisdom; the foolishness of fools is folly.* In translating this, Green gets it right. The focus is not on material gain, so while the Hebrew here simply stops at saying "wealth," it implies the richness of moral discernment. The morally vacant wear their folly like a crown, though it seems more like a dunce cap to others.

25. *A true witness delivers souls, but a deceitful witness speaks lies.* The image is the contrast between pulling in or blowing out. A faithful testimony of moral truth will change people's lives, but a scheming deceiver is a blow-hard who doesn't accomplish anything.

26. *In the fear of the LORD is strong hope, and His sons shall have a place of refuge.* This reverberates into the very real difference between Eastern serenity and Western angst. To walk in moral commitment from the heart is due reverence. It promises that you have nothing to fear in this world He made, because His revelation is entirely consistent with how reality works. This kind of inner peace tends to affect everyone in your sphere of influence.

27. *The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life to turn aside from the snares of death.* Continuing the thought in the previous verse, this offers a play on words not obvious in English. The "fountain" is from the root word for a well you dug to preserve life, whereas the snare is a trap in the form of a pit. What is the purpose of your digging into this life? Embracing the moral character of God will help you discern which is which as you travel through life.

28. *In the multitude of people is the king's honor, but in the lack of people is the ruin of the prince.* The primary difference between Hebrew feudalism and that of the West is that the former considers people the primary store of value. It matters not how much land and resources you own if your rule tends to kill your people. Your people come first; their social stability is the purpose for which God grants the authority to rule. Rule justly and He will provide everything else necessary for life.

29. *He who is slow to wrath is of great understanding, but he who is hasty of spirit exalts folly.* This is an ancient truth, expressing the model of the shepherd character. Punishment is what you pull out when all else has failed and there's nothing left. God advertised this as His own character.

30. *A sound heart is the life of the flesh, but envy the rottenness of the bones.* The word "sound" here is the image of medicinal and helpful. A heart committed to giving and solving problems will make your own body healthy, too. A mind given to petty envy and always thinking that life is unfair will kill you from the inside.

31. *He who presses the poor curses his Maker, but he who honors Him has mercy upon the poor.* The image for poverty here emphasizes dependence by necessity, someone who is simply unfortunate in the human context. If your instinct is to take advantage of them in any way, you

are poking God in the eye. As He has mercy on you, so shall you extend mercy to others as your first reflex.

32. *The wicked is driven away in his wickedness, but the righteous has hope in his death.* Without an active and wise heart ruling your life, death is fearful. If your heart is alive and committed to God's moral truth, death is just a circumstance.

33. *Wisdom rests in the heart of him who has understanding, but among fools it is made known.* Much of this is lost in translation. The image is wisdom soaked deep into the core of someone who embraces moral justice; you might not notice it right away because they tend to act with discernment. However, a fool is empty and their whole existence and nature is fully exposed for all to see.

34. *Righteousness lifts up a nation, but sin is a shame to any people.* This is a matter of emphasis and context. God's revealed standard of justice requires starting first and foremost with Ancient Near Eastern feudalism; this is how we are designed. Even a Gentile nation is a blessing and destined for greatness, if properly organized by that feudal standard. They tend to adhere to moral justice and God uses them for His glory. But rejecting divine justice is an insult to our Creator regardless how well organized and resourceful any random group might be.

35. *The king's favor is toward a wise servant, but his wrath is against him who causes shame.* Related to the previous verse, the word "king" portrays an office rather different from the Western image attached to the word. This tends in Hebrew culture to be the most vigorous elder and implies a capable warlord from your family, clan or tribe. This is the ruling office as vested by God; it is the basic assumption in all His Law Covenants. God backs him up despite his human frailties, so if you embarrass your own blood kin on the throne, you can be sure God is not too happy with you, either.

Proverbs 15

Facts are not on the same level as truth. We are obliged to recognize the moral primacy of social stability under God's revelation. How we handle criticism, justified or otherwise, says a lot about our moral discernment.

1. *A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger.* A popular proverb in many different modern languages today, the emphasis here is tone of voice and choice of words. As a critical part of the Hebrew mindset, even the king needs to consider the context and act justly. Only rarely does divine justice demand a harsh response.

2. *The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours out foolishness.* This verse extends the previous. None of us is the Truth Police, and having accurate knowledge of the facts cannot justify using them as weapons. The question is not the facts themselves, but the moral importance of the facts and whether it serves justice to even speak them. The fool is described as "belching" a foul odor, facts notwithstanding.

3. *The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.* This is the sort of reminder that provides a contextual warning. Do you really want to take this path? Is this according to

the moral justice that beats in your heart? God is paying close attention, even if sometimes giving you enough rope to hang yourself.

4. *A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, but crookedness in it is a break in the spirit.* The Hebrew word for “wholesome” denotes a curative or redemptive effect. The implication is a vivid and joyful life. This is contrasted with distortion or perversity in speech, which fractures the spiritual nature like broken bones.

5. *A fool despises his father’s instruction, but he who listens to correction is wise.* We’ve seen this kind of proverb already, and it bears repeating in other forms, as we see later. This is not limited to a literal male parent; it denotes a type of moral dominion. One could rightly call many different male leaders “father” – king, any tribal leader, teacher, role models, etc. Thus, the primary failure here is despising justified dominion attached to any particular social role. The word translated as “instruction” refers to setting boundaries; discern where leadership is steering things.

6. *In the house of the righteous is much treasure, but in the gain of the wicked is trouble.* Another proverb that echoes at least one other we’ve seen before. The term “house” implies the broader personal dominion, everything that you control or in which you are involved in any way. By now it should be obvious that the treasure is moral in nature, though it may well be matched by material wealth, particularly in a covenant setting. The word “trouble” here offers the image of noisy, bubbling water that sheep won’t approach for drinking.

7. *The lips of the righteous send forth knowledge, but the heart of the foolish is not so.* This echoes the previous verse. A more literal rendering says the foolish heart simply cannot.

8. *The sacrifice of the wicked is a hateful thing to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is His delight.* A strong contrast that reminds us we cannot purchase the Lord’s favor by mere ritual, but even the poorest with a pure heart can gain God’s ear.

9. *The way of the wicked is hateful to the LORD, but He loves him who pursues righteousness.* This clearly echoes the previous verse. The wording portrays wickedness as a well-worn path, but divine justice chases the Lord through the wilderness, if necessary. Thus, social custom is a good place to start, but tradition is not a good reason for anything when you begin to discern moral purity.

10. *Correction is grievous to him who forsakes the way; he who hates reproof shall die.* This proverb draws a contrast with the previous. One can also be too hasty in rejecting well-tested social customs. When you understand properly why a tradition stands, you are in a better position to question it. You will also be ready to handle objections, but people with no justification will dread having to face criticism. Moral discernment brings peace in all contexts.

11. *Hell and destruction are before the LORD; even more the hearts of the sons of men?* We note that *sheol* and *abaddon* are ambiguous symbolic terms, but the context makes them figurative for the abode of God’s wrath, whatever that might mean in the higher realms above our plane of existence. Thus, since God has no trouble inspecting those places beyond our understanding, as if they were just outside the door of His divine court, how could we on a far lower plane expect to hide our true commitments from Him? Nothing is beyond His awareness.

12. *A scorner does not love one who corrects him, nor will he go to the wise.* This echoes verse 10 above. A scoffer is anyone who disparages social stability (*shalom*) on God's terms. We should hardly be surprised when the fool avoids those who accept the burden of social leadership with any measure of moral purity.

13. *A merry heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken.* Most Westerners miss the point here. Telling people to "cheer up" is often senseless and demeaning. The point of this proverb is the heart and its perception of justice. When justice prevails, your heart knows, and it will seem like a relief from stress. Just so, the heart discerns when moral justice is oppressed, and it makes one sad.

14. *The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness.* A study in contrasts again, we have first the image of someone who values moral justice enough to invest resources in gaining discernment. This is choosing the heart over the rest of the self, a kind of self-denial. The fool is like a pig, hoovering up whatever answers to the hunger of his fleshly desires. The wise seek to cultivate an appetite for moral justice.

15. *All the days of the afflicted are evil, but gladness of heart is a continual a feast.* This simply echoes verse 13 above but includes the sentiment of the proverb between. To be afflicted in this context refers to that same sense of moral oppression, where nature itself cries out loudly in our ears for divine justice. Yet again, when social stability is honored, nature itself sings joyfully to us.

16. *Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and tumult with it.* A contrast between the value of material versus moral treasures. Don't trade moral purity for worldly profit.

17. *Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred with it.* This offers a more picturesque version of the previous proverb. An ox in the stall represents significant wealth.

18. *A wrathful man stirs up fighting, but one slow to anger calms fighting.* Don't give someone else control over your feelings, unless you are capable of killing all your new enemies and living with the consequences. Obviously, this defies God's command for social stability.

19. *The way of the lazy one is like a hedge of thorns, but the way of the righteous is made plain.* As usual, this emphasizes moral discernment. You can be altogether industrious to no good purpose, so the point here is to exercise your heart's discernment first. The image contrasts a thorny hedge as a fence against a wide-open highway of moral clarity.

20. *A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish man despises his mother.* We've seen this one twice before and it will come around a few more times before the book ends. In this context, it simply echoes the previous verse in different terms. If God commands that we honor our parents, then it's just one more reason to invest in your heart's mastery in moral discernment.

21. *Folly is joy to him who is without any wisdom, but a man of understanding walks uprightly.* Lacking wisdom is a valid translation of the Hebrew phrase "void of heart," but may still be misleading. Someone who ignores their heart-mind will take delight in moral silliness. This person is easily distracted from morally important tasks, while a heart-led man can be trusted.

22. *Without wisdom, purposes are defeated, but by many wise men they are established.* In this verse, lack of wisdom is the image of having no wise counselors. The whole idea is that someone with less skin in the game than you might have a better view of the big picture. Hebrew men of action generally kept at least one advisor around. In this case, the more you can afford the better.

23. *A man has joy by the answer of his mouth; and a word in due season, how good it is!* This one requires a proper context; it is otherwise a bit subtle. It's fun for everyone involved if one can say the right thing at the right time. A talent for it is priceless.

24. *The way of life is above to the wise, so that he may turn away from hell below.* This simply defines the imagery commonly used in such proverbs. Moral wisdom is life on a higher plane of awareness and keeps you from suffering, both now and eternally.

25. *The LORD will destroy the house of the proud, but He will set up the border of the widow.* We have here a subtle contrast with the previous proverb. The paradox of walking in the higher realms is that it makes you humble. Thus, by definition the arrogant are lacking moral truth and their dominion in life will be morally empty, much as a man who loses his entire inheritance. A widow is a common Hebrew image of someone who has lost everything, including all social standing and material support, and wouldn't dare pretend arrogance. God defends the humble.

26. *The thoughts of the wicked are very hateful to the LORD, but the words of the pure are pleasant words.* This is both a restatement of the previous, and phrasing we've seen before in Proverbs. God might delay mortal wrath but also withholds His moral peace until a man wants it enough to embrace revelation.

27. *He who is greedy for gain troubles his own house, but he who hates bribes shall live.* Again, the standard is a higher moral peace. Within a covenant community, you would expect a more literal application. The real wealth in this world has always been moral purity.

28. *The heart of the righteous studies to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.* This is the typical Hebrew affinity for letting the heart answer first, then engaging the mind and mouth. It implies seeking the wisdom of the Spirit for answers the mind cannot comprehend, but that the heart can translate as moral imperative. Otherwise, the content makes no difference. It is foul belching simply because it was not taken before the Lord first, as it were.

29. *The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.* Almost the same words as in verse 8 above, the context emphasizes righteousness as taking the time to consider things from the higher moral standpoint. A higher moral consciousness brings you closer to God, while a silenced heart keeps you remote from Him.

30. *The light of the eyes rejoices the heart; a good report makes the bones fat.* The lyrical phrasing is subtle and ambiguous. We have a parallel of eyes that see by the light of the sun with ears that hear a good moral teaching. The other parallel is a heart that rejoices and a healthy body. The imagery makes sense if you understand the concept of reality itself defined by God's moral character. When your perception is attuned to seeing the glory of God in Creation, it's no different from reading a good word of divine revelation. A heart that is full of divine joy tends to make your body, and by extension your entire human existence, strong and healthy.

31. *The ear that hears the reproof of life shall remain among the wise.* This extends the metaphor of Creation resounding with the moral character of God. If you cultivate an awareness of how your experiences in life speak to you of moral reality, then God will treat you like a VIP in His court.

32. *He who refuses instruction despises his own soul, but he who hears reproof gets understanding.* As before, the translation equates the Hebrew term for “heart” as wisdom. If you are willing to entertain something offered as correction or reproof, even if you can’t use it, that willingness indicates your heart is alive and active on the moral plane of awareness.

33. *The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom, and before honor is humility.* Reverence for God is equated with a high status in His divine court. It requires a certain level of awareness to sense the divine Presence in the first place, but with that sense comes the inevitable overwhelming burden of guilt and shame at our fallen nature. Without that ground of understanding, there is no hope of hearing from God how He intends for us to live in this world. If your awareness of His holiness teaches you penitence, then you are ready to hear that revelation. Embracing His revelation honors Him, and in turn shines the light of His glory into your life. In a more literal translation, that last phrase is “humility is the face of honor.”

Proverbs 16

This chapter addresses divine sovereignty from the unique worldview of a mystical Hebrew mind, fully aware of the complexity of human nature.

1. *The ordering of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the LORD.* The intent here is to make you ponder the ambiguities of human awareness. We tend to believe intellectually that we can make various kinds of choices, but the heart does only what God designed it to do. The mind is somewhat untrustworthy. Thus, by the time your thoughts reach your lips, God can still intervene, and you’ll end up saying something you didn’t intend. Whether or not your words reveal the truth of your heart is for the listener to decide.

2. *All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirits.* You can rationalize almost any course of action, and most people tell themselves that their choices are the best for everyone. However, God sees things that we tend to hide from ourselves and His personal evaluation is what matters in the end.

3. *Roll your works upon the LORD, and your thoughts shall be established.* Green chose here a more literal rendering of the Hebrew concept often translated as “commit” with the image of rolling things up in a bundle for storage. If you maintain a conscious awareness that your Sovereign will call you to account for your actions, it helps to clarify the direction of your thinking. On the one hand, God is watching every moment; on the other hand, our human awareness of His wrath tends to be episodic.

4. *The LORD has made all for His purpose; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.* This continues the thought in the previous verse about periodic awareness. Just because someone else seems to get away with evil doesn’t mean God won’t call him to account sooner or later. Some of our human experience will remain inexplicable in this lifetime because of the limits of our awareness. In

your mind, let human evil be God's problem, and mind your own business. Give God credit for wisdom, insight and power beyond your own.

5. *Everyone proud in heart is hateful to the LORD; though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.* This is more along the same line of thought about the limits of human awareness. Human evil is bad enough, but sometimes it can feel as if our whole world has conspired against us. Give God time to work out His divine justice for His own glory while you pay attention to the domain He placed in your hands.

6. *By mercy and truth, iniquity is purged, and by the fear of the LORD men turn away from evil.* The word translated "purged" comes from the Hebrew concept of covered, as something that has been dealt with and is no longer an issue. It comes from the image of daubing pitch on a surface to stop leaking, halting any further trouble. Whatever the problem, now the healing and restoration can begin. In the typical Hebrew parallelism, reverence and respect for God's reputation prevents all kinds of trouble.

7. *When a man's ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.* This assumes a covenant community where "enemies" are folks who make life difficult, and you aren't in a position to simply eliminate them. As before, just pay attention to your own duty toward God and let Him handle things, because walking in His character will fill your whole existence with His power.

8. *Better is a little with righteousness than great gain without right.* The apparent material substance of our human existence is deceptive. Drag your awareness up into your heart and see all things from a moral perspective of divine justice. You should expect to pay a material price for moral riches.

9. *A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.* This restates verse 1 above in different terms. You are fortunate, indeed, if you can subject your conscious awareness to what your heart can perceive in the moral sphere. The image of "plans" is weaving or plaiting loose ends into a unity of sorts, getting your disparate human elements together behind a single purpose in life. That's as much as anyone can do, so let God take care of how it turns out.

10. *A divine sentence is in the lips of the king; his mouth does not transgress in judgment.* This is hardly calling for blind obedience to your superiors, a concept wholly foreign to the Hebrew culture. It continues under the assumptions previously stated, that you understand God will work in you and through you when you embrace His character. Thus, when you come before a king, God will use his mouth as an oracle ("divine sentence") even without the king's conscious awareness. The king's intent may not matter if you pay attention to God first, because He won't allow human fallibility to hide His justice.

11. *A just weight and balance are the LORD's; all the weights of the bag are His work.* This continues the same thought as the previous verse. Trust God for the things you cannot control. Walk in personal holiness and know that God is at work in ways you may not see. In the final analysis, He will ensure the scales of justice balance out because His weights are the standard.

12. *It is a hateful thing for kings to commit wickedness; for the throne is established by righteousness.* God finds government misconduct disgusting and won't protect an evil government. This is the

other edge of the same blade of truth in the previous verses. It's not as if God demands blind support for bad government, but it is our duty to trust Him for things we cannot change.

13. *Righteous lips are the delight of kings, and they love him who speaks right.* This hearkens back to the definition of royalty. A truly regal man will prefer servants who are morally upright. Even evil kings find such people useful, and God will use your presence on His staff as leverage to expose sin.

14. *The wrath of a king is as messengers of death, but a wise man will quiet it.* In general, it's pointless to provoke rulers. This serves as a warning to smart-alecks who think they know everything and try to act like Truth Police. Righteousness is not found in objective facts, but in understanding that the primary mission of moral righteousness is social stability. Causing trouble can hurt innocent bystanders.

15. *In the light of the king's face is life, and his favor is like a cloud of the latter rain.* This continues the previous verse. Not in the sense of playing yes-man, you should honestly seek the king's welfare within the limits of your abilities. Chances are people are going to know if you genuinely care. In dealing with rulers, peace is good for everyone else, too.

16. *How much better it is to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is rather to be chosen than silver!* This echoes verse 8 above. Wisdom and understanding are synonymous with moral insight, so let your heart lead with moral vision and don't worry about how well it seems to pay in material terms.

17. *The way of the upright is to turn away from evil; he who keeps his way guards his way.* This is simply a flawed translation, rendering three different words as "way." It draws the image of moral wisdom as a highway, and as good maintenance on an important road. The third "way" is probably a typo, because the Hebrew term is closer to "soul." Highways were all about making commerce and defense possible. If those things matter to social stability, even more so does a commitment to divine justice make life worth living.

18. *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.* This is a very popular quote in Western literature. In typical Hebrew fashion, it addresses both the individual and society. Your stupid arrogance can hurt a lot of other people, not just yourself.

19. *It is better to be of an humble spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoil with the proud.* Almost as popular as the previous verse, this one continues the same thought. Divine justice seldom operates on the same time scale as human awareness. It serves well to remind people that humility might not make you rich, but it will help you avoid most calamities in the long run. Arrogance carries a high risk, and even if you win, you can't keep it forever.

20. *He who handles a matter wisely shall find good, and whoever trusts in the LORD, happy is he.* This restates the theme of this whole chapter. You really cannot understand the Law Covenants until you adopt the higher moral value system behind them. It's not mechanistic and the rewards cannot be measured with human senses. However, it is what we are designed for, so if you want to really enjoy this life, you'll have to address it from the realm of moral justice.

21. *The wise in heart shall be called prudent, and the sweetness of the lips increases learning.* More of the same, the emphasis here is on what you are able to speak. Whether you say little or much,

people will have a much greater respect for you if your words reflect moral justice. The only way to get that is to let your heart-mind rule over your intellect. The heart retains a vivid awareness of things the mind could easily forget.

22. *Understanding is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly.* English translations often lose the full flavor of this verse. In a land where water can be scarce, digging a well counts as a very heavy investment of resources. If it results in a supply of water, it's worth fighting over, but also morally incumbent to share generously with anyone who isn't a threat. Moral prudence is like that, in contrast to the polluted ooze of someone who can't be bothered to see past his own lusts.

23. *The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, and adds learning to his lips.* This is a quintessential eastern notion of wisdom. Your heart is a separate faculty above your intellect, and far superior in grasping moral reality. Let your heart rule your mouth, and by implication, your conduct.

24. *Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.* This continues the theme of bringing moral justice into your social intercourse. People who truly see what God intended in Creation have a tendency to reveal that insight, and regardless of initial or surface reactions from others, it's a blessing to them.

25. *There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end of it is the ways of death.* Echoing verse 2 above, this is often quoted improperly by Westerners. They get the English words right but fail to grasp what Solomon was saying. It's not a question of how smart you are in your individual choices, but a cynicism about human nature itself. If all you have are common human faculties, it won't get you where you need to go in this world. And if all you have are common human faculties, you'll probably die without a clue because you'll be morally dead long before.

26. *He who labors works for himself, for his mouth craves it from him.* A weak translation at best, this is one of those statements meant to apply differently on different levels. In the Hebrew, "he who" is the word for soul, and "himself" is actually the same root word as "mouth." The words for labor and work both carry the flavor of discomfort. Thus, the soul that toils in sorrow serves the "blow hole." Depending on the context, it may be simply noting that this life is inherently sorrowful in some ways. You could use this to emphasize the sorrow of slavish devotion to mere human appetite, which would be more to the point of this chapter.

27. *An ungodly man plots evil, and his lips are like a burning fire.* This echoes the thoughts of the previous verse. Your character determines where you expend your energies because they are bound together in what you value most.

28. *A perverse man causes fighting, and a whisperer separates chief friends.* Again, more of the previous verses in the sense of a specific example that calls us back to the awareness of social stability. In your social awareness, avoid people who have a knack for stirring up strife without seeming to get caught in the middle.

29. *A violent man lures his neighbor and makes him go in a way not good.* In the same theme still as the previous verses, this is recognizing something based on its effects. If you lure people into things that get them killed, you have blood on your hands.

30. *The gray head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness.* The reverse of the previous verses, this uses a Hebrew figure of speech. Gray hair implies you've been there, wherever "there" was. If you got your gray hairs by living a morally good life, they serve as a crown of glory. Chances are you had to put up with a lot of crap along the way so wear them proudly.

31. *He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit is better than he who takes a city.* Still on the same theme of social interaction, this also restates the previous verse from a different angle. You can be a vigorous man of action and conquer whole cities single-handedly, but someone else can come along and take it all away from you. If you can simply restrain your own emotional urges by moral wisdom, then you have a greatness that whole armies cannot assail.

32. *The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing of it is from the LORD.* Right back where the chapter started, this parable relies on a common Hebrew symbolic image. So far as we can determine, casting lots is a reference to having several pebbles of the same size and shape but different colors. They were tossed into a fold of the garment, and one was fished out blindly, with the decision being based on whatever choice was associated with the color. In Western culture it randomizes choosing one among more-or-less equal options, but for Hebrews it was consciously deferring to God. Even if the matter itself seems inconsequential, it's best to trust in God over your human abilities.

Proverbs 17

The emphasis here is filial piety and personal loyalty. *Shalom* starts at home.

1. *Better is a dry piece of bread, and quietness with it, than a house full of sacrifices with fighting.* A literal rendering of the Hebrew would use the word "morsel" as a single bite of just about any food, something broken off of a larger serving. This along with moral abundance ("quietness") is still a better life than a whole house full of whole animal carcasses ("sacrifices") if it comes with adversarial living. Sacrifice your personal comfort in favor of a peaceful home.

2. *A wise servant shall have rule over a son who causes shame, and shall have part of the inheritance among the brothers.* This is as much instruction as observation. This assumes a society that doesn't suffer from prissy pretense. If a family member brings shame, it's typically because they have no moral grasp, no sense of accountability. Don't take this as baldly literal, but a symbolic image of how some people need close supervision. Ancient custom allowed delaying the right of passage to adulthood within the household for a troublesome son, or advancing it when the child learned to act in the family interest. It was not unheard of for men to die under tutelage, never gaining full control of their inheritance, but having to take their allowance from some non-family manager who served the head of household. In real terms, the manager holds all the privileges of inheritance.

3. *The refining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tries the hearts.* Gold or silver out of the ground wasn't all that valuable until it was purified. So it is with humans; we are born in need of purification and redemption. If you reject the fire of your soul's refinement, you

will remain little more than a potential person who cannot participate in God's blessings. Must we mention that some of your greatest trials are in the family setting?

4. *A wicked doer gives heed to false lips; a liar gives ear to an evil tongue.* The concept of deception here is not simply factual errors, but moral errors. Truth is not mere fact but is agreeing with whatever God says about this world. You should learn to treat immoral chatter the same as criminal actions, because the two feed off each other. Don't hang out with family that runs to either problem.

5. *Whoever scorns the poor reviles his Maker; he who is glad at calamities shall not be unpunished.* The word "scorn" would be better translated as mocking, the idea of making fun of someone. This is a standard Hebrew parallelism. People who are amused at human misfortune are an insult to God because they seek to play God in the sense of making something worse than it has to be. It's just a very thin separation from blasphemy; all the more so when it concerns your family.

6. *Sons of sons are the crown of old men, and the glory of sons are their fathers.* This is more subtle than it seems in English. However much repute (and associated blessings) someone can have in this world is morally bound up in his or her extended family. This is another way of reminding people that they cannot argue with God about their DNA, as if He made some mistake putting them in this or that household. The blessings God offers require that you make the most of your situation starting with your birth.

7. *An excellent lip is not fitting for a fool; much less are lying lips fitting for a prince.* Since the definition of "fool" is someone with no moral sense of commitment to social stability, you wouldn't expect a fool to exhibit charisma. By the same token, you wouldn't call someone "noble" if they were foolish in that sense. This is another case of confessing God's moral truth about what you discern in the world around you. Don't be a sucker for social pretense. Even if you stand alone in your household, be noble by keeping honesty alive.

8. *A bribe is like a precious stone in the eyes of him who has it; wherever he turns, he is prudent.* The Hebrew here is ambiguous, so translations may vary widely. The word translated "bribe" is actually any sort of gift or offering, regardless of the purpose. This is likely intentional, since a great many proverbs address multiple levels of moral consideration. It's also uncertain whether the owner of the stone is doing the turning and prospering. In a cultural context where passing gratuities up the social chain was entirely routine (think of it as tribute to your elders), the proper moral consideration is to be careful how you go about it. If you can't be savvy, at least be honorable. Keep a clear conscience in all your dealings and you won't have to worry about what God sees as He examines your heart and directs His blessings accordingly.

9. *He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends.* The image for "cover" here is making sure something is complete. Thus, it's a redemptive act to help someone else with his standard human weaknesses and failures. The idea behind "repeat" carries the notion of compounding an error, making it worse. Are you a faithful member of the same team, or do you expose your folks to public ridicule?

10. *A reproof enters more into a wise man than a thousand stripes into a fool.* English translations differ on the actual number, but the point is well taken. Someone morally committed to divine

justice will take into consideration what people say, even if he can't actually comply. A fool hears only the voice inside his own flesh and beating that flesh won't change the voice.

11. *An evil one seeks only rebellion; so a cruel messenger shall be sent against him.* The word "cruel" would better be translated as "brutal." The head of household would always try to have at least one man-at-arms. This is as much a matter of temperament as skill. A chief or king would always have his cadre of executioners. God makes some folks better able to decide when violence is justified, men who proceed without hesitation. It has nothing to do with weaker morals, but a different approach to trouble. Leaders retain people like that because there will always be at least one fool who can't seem to hear the words of a gentle messenger. Some people only respond to the wrath of God's Laws.

12. *Let a bear robbed of her cubs meet a man, rather than a fool in his folly.* The word order is clumsy in English. A bereaved mother bear was easily the most fearsome creature in that part of the world. Still, a man confronted with such would be better off than if he encountered a man who was bereaved of moral character. How much worse it is when the fool is family.

13. *Whoever rewards evil for good, evil shall not depart from his house.* We live in a world where even the best intentions can sometimes go wrong. So, a bad situation can get the best of us, and we act rashly. Social customs generally make a way for apologies and repentance, encouraging mercy. However, when someone is consistent in consciously taking advantage of people over whom they exercise some power, that person God will not allow to live in peace. If nothing else, the moral destruction will echo throughout all their dealings. How sad to be born in such a household!

14. *The beginning of strife is like letting out water; therefore leave off fighting, before it breaks out.* It's easier to prevent a flood by reinforcing a dam than to put all that water back once the dam breaks. Just so, it's easier to let some offenses slide than start a fight that breaks up a family's stability. Note: This is not the same as ignoring evil, but the reader is expected to recognize the different context. Not everything displeasing to you is a threat to the family.

15. *He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, even both of them are hateful to the LORD.* This goes along with the previous verse. There comes a point when something is beyond repair, and you have to realize it reflects an evil desire that threatens the moral covering of the household. Castigating someone who dares to point that out is equally evil. Westerners struggle with this because of a bizarre absolutism when it comes to family relations, something alien to the Scripture. The Hebrew people had protocols for divorcing from a family where you just could not find a peaceful place.

16. *Why is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, since he has no heart for it?* This is a figure of speech that translates poorly. It's rather like asking why you would give someone money and send them to the store to buy something when he has no idea what it is. To be a fool is the same as having a dead heart, incapable of discerning the moral fabric of Creation. Some people seem to possess no capacity at all for awakening their hearts. There's not enough money in the world to buy moral discernment.

17. *A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for the time of trouble.* A Hebrew parallel, the terms for “friend” and “brother” are equally ambiguous, defined by context. You know whom to call friend and brother by how they stand by you regardless of the situation. Honor such people accordingly.

18. *A man lacking heart strikes hands; he pledges in the presence of his friend.* Again, the word for “friend” is contextual. Notice the literal comment about lacking a strong heart-mind. While Hebrew law permitted people to cosign loans, it was always considered high risk. Typically, someone wealthier and more powerful would cosign, someone who could pay off the debt and find a way to extract the balance from the other. Most people can’t play that rough with their peers, so it was considered folly to consign for someone your social peer. Since ancient times it was very destructive of family relations.

19. *He who loves fighting loves transgression; he who makes his gate high seeks ruin.* Another challenging figure of speech in poetic parallel, the focus here is on provoking trouble in any social context. If you find conflict entertaining, you might as well be in open rebellion against your own kin, because you will bring all kinds of moral failures into the household. A “high gate” presents the image of provocative arrogance, someone just looking for an excuse to make trouble.

20. *He who has a perverse heart finds no good, and he who has a crooked tongue falls into mischief.* This parallelism is more obvious, in that a heart choked by hedonism lies behind a perverse tongue. Not so much in the sense of saying naughty things, but a perverse tongue goes overboard, outrageously asserting things contrary to the revealed moral character of God. It’s just a step away from outright blasphemy. A wise head of household would run such folks out of town.

21. *He who fathers a fool does it to his sorrow; the father of a fool has no joy.* Actually, there are two different words translated as “father” here. The first is the verb for begetting children whether as mother, father or even midwife. The point is that anyone involved in the life of a child who never awakens the moral discernment of his heart will deeply regret that involvement. Sorrow is their destiny.

22. *A merry heart does good like a medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones.* The sentiment here is echoed in many other passages in the Bible. People who rejoice in the moral character of God, who delight in discovering how it is woven into every part of Creation, are the best medicine for every ill that afflicts humanity. Their faith is contagious. You pray to find such people in your household and do your best to isolate someone who bears a gloomy outlook. Depression can be somewhat contagious, too.

23. *A wicked man takes a bribe out of the bosom to pervert the ways of judgment.* This is the same word for “bribe” as in verse 8 above, but the context is obviously limited. Unlike some customary tribute offered openly as a mark of high honor, this is something sneaky. It seeks to seduce the higher power into dishonor and injustice. This is particularly destructive in the family setting.

24. *Wisdom is before him who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth.* Here is another unfamiliar figure of speech. The image is a savvy fellow keeping his attention focused on moral wisdom, contrasted against a fool who seeks just about everything except wisdom.

The obvious point is encouraging a sense of moral focus as if paying attention to someone great and mighty.

25. *A foolish son is a grief to his father, and bitterness to her who bore him.* This one keeps coming back in different contexts. However, it is particularly appropriate in this chapter themed on family moral stability. Compare this with the commandment to honor your father and mother.

26. *And it is not good to punish the just, nor to strike princes for uprightness.* Recall from previous proverbs that the just need only verbal correction. To punish them the same as fools is a grave offense to God, on a par with any kind of violence against nobility or royalty when they are morally upright. In the latter case, you'd be lucky to live much longer, since powerful folks keep armed guards around. How much worse it is to fall into God's wrath for eternity.

27. *He who has knowledge uses few words; a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit.* The first phrase we have seen before. It's more than just a solid grasp of the subject where you can answer with concise brevity, but you have no need to put on a show to demonstrate your expertise. It's not reluctance, but reticence. The second is a figure of speech indicating someone who is a rare treasure. Keep such people around because they won't waste time and energy on frivolity.

28. *Even a fool, when he is silent, is counted wise, and he who shuts his lips is counted as a man of understanding.* This continues the previous verse. Anyone who seeks to show off usually proves only his incompetence. These last two verses support the teaching of not throwing pearls before swine. It's hard to share truth with someone whose life is one big lie. It's also hard to live in the same house with them.

Proverbs 18

The primary topic here is dealing with the wider society that is not close kin. A critical background element is the recognition that some things should stay in your heart and other things belong in the privacy of the home, with yet another level of exposure for general society. It requires discerning what's proper with any given audience, thus promoting social stability.

1. *He that separates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound wisdom.* The idea here is a spiteful isolation of self against his fellow humans, as if he is too obviously superior. He isn't driven out for any valid reason but can't stand to be around real people.

2. *A fool has no delight in understanding, but only that his heart may lay itself bare.* This might better be translated a fool having no interest in discretion, but shamefully exposes his ugly heart to everyone. The idea is recognizing no sane boundaries.

3. *When the wicked comes, scorn also comes, and with shame comes reproach.* This continues the thought of the previous verse. The concept of "wicked" means quite obviously perverse and spiteful of norms. Shameless filth is hardly the same as shameless truth.

4. *The words of a man's mouth are like deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is like a flowing stream.* In the semi-desert terrain of Palestine, any source of water is precious beyond words. If the flow of

water is sufficient to swim, that's major security against drought and starvation. So, a wise mouth is an incalculable asset to any community.

5. *It is not good to favor the person of the wicked, nor to overthrow the righteous in judgment.* This concerns the community court system of elderly men who gather near the gate of any city. It's their duty to hang out there as the means to disseminating information and important community business, each taking the day's summary back to the important households and neighborhoods they represent. The statement here should seem obvious, but the standard honorarium could become a bribe too easily. Never mind what's in your pocket; this is a matter of social stability.

6. *A fool's lips enter into argument, and his mouth calls for strokes.* This and next two verses cover the same basic idea. Someone who starts fights is a fool by definition, because almost anything can be handled diplomatically. Community stability calls for punishing such troublemakers.

7. *A fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul.* This one continues from the previous by noting that punishing a fool for making trouble is in his own best interest. Give him a chance to see the need to stop being a mouthy fool.

8. *The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.* Continuing on the same vein as the previous two verses, we need to remind ourselves that Hebrew culture considered feelings (associated with the belly or bowels) as much more than mere emotion, but something fundamental to one's physical sense of integrity. Fools seeking to break boredom and entertain themselves by telling twisted lies to provoke social discord don't realize what a serious problem it creates. Those lies tend to wound that root sense of safety. It's more than causing a fight between two or more people but destroys the fundamental sense of peace by stirring up a very powerful sense of angst.

9. *Also he who is slack in his work is brother to a great destroyer.* Solomon hastens to add that someone who fails due diligence in social responsibilities in any way is actually the ally of those who actively destroy social stability. It's all the same team.

10. *The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe.* This and the next verse offer a contrast. Here we see the obvious reference to Jehovah whose lordship creates a refuge to any human problem. Trust in God.

11. *The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as a high wall in his own mind.* Connected to the previous verse, this one says that wealthy people tend to trust too much in their own possessions. Walls can be torn down and wealth taken by force or stealth, but nothing can threaten God.

12. *Before shattering, the heart of man is proud, and before honor is humility.* Discern the end of which path you take. If you start down the path of arrogance, you will end up a forgotten ruin. If genuine honor is your desired destination, take the path of humility.

13. *If one answers a matter before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.* This is somewhat related to the previous verse in that it shows arrogance to declare a matter closed without enduring a full hearing by those involved. Even God tends to wait things out with far more patience than humans can muster.

14. *The spirit of a man will nourish his sickness, but a wounded spirit who can bear?* This one is subtle. Most human illness will run its course and we need only endure through it with grace. People who have suffered from other kinds of problems that tend to destroy faith can't even handle good health. This demands that we all stop and think about ways to build up faith for others and for ourselves.

15. *The heart of the prudent gets knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.* This verse is rather precise in a certain sense if we can discern the imagery. The active heart-led life accumulates savvy, and someone who is paying attention can process his experiences to gain that savvy. This is part of the source whence Jesus said that to him who has, more shall be given, because moral wisdom tends to snowball.

16. *A man's gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men.* The question here is what kind of gifts you bring to society. Mere tribute and bribes bring you in one door, but honest heart-led commitment to social welfare and stability produces an entirely different audience with human authorities. What kind of power do you want to enhance in your community?

17. *The first in his cause seems just, but his neighbor comes and searches him.* This is a very ancient saying. It presumes we understand the ancient community courts system. If your opponent gets to go first, he has the advantage of laying out a sob story that could prejudice the judges. They probably have little idea of the bigger picture. The smart move is not to directly counter his narrative, but to tear it apart by cross-examination, making him look like a despicable liar. Bonus points if you can use artistic sarcasm to entertain the judges and make them laugh at your opponent.

18. *The lot causes arguments to cease, and divides between the mighty.* Hebrew culture assumed that God was in full control of any form of drawing lots. If two or more opponents contest the same indivisible item, don't let them fight over it. Force them to accept luck of the draw lest it explode into a blood feud. The Hebrew term for "lots" refers to smooth stones of the same size, shape and weight, but different colors. It was common for priests and judges to keep on hand something that served this purpose, something always subject to examination for the sake of fairness.

19. *A brother offended is like a strong city; and their disagreements are like the bars of a fortress.* The term for "brother" depicts someone with a reasonable expectation of trust and alliance, regardless of actual shared DNA. This is someone who was more open to you on more levels of trust, so betrayal is far more painful, as is the moral implication. Worse, this person knows you all too well to accept anything less than a very painful and sincere penitence.

20. *A man's belly shall be satisfied with the fruit of his mouth; he shall be satisfied with the product of his lips.* This would seem ambiguous to Western minds, but it assumes the ancient Hebrew understanding of human nature. The "fruit of lips" is a figure of speech for how you engage the world around you in terms of moral outcomes. While your sense of physical appetite professes no interest in how it gets what it demands, your mind and heart do know. Your sense of moral integrity can affect your digestion for that reason. It's a case of learning to eat whatever you have cooked up.

21. *Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it shall eat the fruit of it.* This is closely related to the previous verse. How you talk to others can contribute to an atmosphere of death or life in your community. If you delight in one or the other trend, it will come back to haunt you.

22. *Whoever finds a wife finds good and gets favor from the LORD.* This has nothing to do with a personal call to celibacy, but the broader social implications of building a world where marriage and children are safe. This actually calls for treating your spouse as a precious treasure from God, not just a convenience.

23. *The poor speaks humble requests, but the rich answers roughly.* Perhaps this could be as easily translated as, “Can you afford to be rude?” Being wealthy and powerful might let you get away with it, but your friends last only so long as your wealth. Most people won’t notice how this connects to the previous verse, or the one that follows.

24. *A man who has friends may be broken up, but there is a Lover who sticks closer than a brother.* There is some dispute about the text of this verse in the latter half of the first phrase. However, the net result makes little difference because the whole point is the second phrase. There is some give and take between your associates, but you should always have at least one person in your life who can take you at your worst. That requires a much higher investment than mere friendship.

Proverbs 19

The world is a hard place. This chapter collects sayings that address what we can honestly expect from fallen humanity, even when we presume a covenant community. Please note that there are two words for “poor” here; one denotes being in need as a fact, while the other emphasizes being needy as a character trait. However, let us not forget that in Hebrew, context is everything, so the words can be interchangeable at times.

1. *Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than he who is perverse in his lips, and is a fool.* This is “poor” in the factual sense. The word translated as “integrity” can also be translated as prosperity, a play on words that indicates moral wealth. Don’t ignore moral opportunities for mere material goods.

2. *Also without knowledge the soul is not good, and he who hurries with his feet sins.* Starting with “also” indicates this continues the previous proverb. The context here emphasizes knowledge in the sense of cunning or strategy, obviously in the moral sense. The image of hurried or swift feet is often a parable for the heedless rush of fools. The word for “sin” indicates running down the wrong path.

3. *The foolishness of man perverts his way, and his heart frets against the LORD.* The image here is someone who can’t stay on the main road to moral integrity but takes all kinds of detours after every lust that calls his name. The word “heart” here indicates a sense of consciousness; it ought to be rooted in his heart-mind, but he’s too busy chasing his desires, so he is often frustrated at how God does things.

4. *Wealth makes many friends; but the poor is separated from his neighbor.* This is the image of someone born to wealth and carefree, versus someone who can't make on his own. In our cruel world, too many people judge by what they can get from you, never mind your character.
5. *A false witness shall not be unpunished, and a breather of lies shall not escape.* There is a subtle and delicious imagery here not obvious in most English translations, comparing a plotting deceiver with a noisy windbag. The first will never come clean and the second can never slip away from his troubles.
6. *Many will beg the favor of a ruler, and all are friends to a man who gives gifts.* Hebrew parallelism often says the same thing two different ways. We first need to remind ourselves that Ancient Near Eastern political power often rested on fearless generosity and extravagance. The imagery in the first phrase is someone coming around trying to wear away the friction or resistance to get some face time with a powerful figure. It's amazing how some people work so hard for freebies instead of putting effort into a simple paycheck. The second phrase of this parable refers to trying to be pals with someone who tends to be generous.
7. *All the brothers of the poor man hate him; how much more do his friends go far from him? He pursues them with words, yet they are lacking.* This is a contrast to the previous verse. If words are all you have to give, nobody wants to be near you, even if they are socially obliged to you.
8. *He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who keeps understanding shall find good.* This is simply a poor translation. "He who builds his heart loves Creation; he who guards that kind of wisdom knows he has found what's good."
9. *A false witness shall not be unpunished, and one speaking lies shall perish.* Restated here as a contrasting companion to the previous verse, this is almost word for word the same as verse 5 above. The last word is changed to indicate getting lost in the wilderness and never found alive.
10. *Luxury is not becoming for a fool; much less for a servant to have rule over princes.* You can be sure this arises from the most ancient human memory, and the meaning is patently obvious. Sometimes you wonder how people got where they are, and it's painful to watch how it affects everyone else involved.
11. *The judgment of a man puts off his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.* When something strikes you like a personal insult, it is prudent to set it aside until you can decide whether it really matters. Don't take yourself too seriously; take your divine calling seriously.
12. *The king's wrath is like the roaring of a lion; but his favor is like dew on the grass.* In the context, this emphasizes the magnitude of the man's power over you. By implication, it's a harsh reality that if you have no power, people will not feel accountable to you. They'll tread lightly around a king, though.
13. *A foolish son is ruin to his father, and the quarreling of a wife is a never-ending dripping.* In Hebrew society, there were two kinds of people who could create such awful stress as to bring you to an early grave. The Hebrew image of "foolish" here is someone who is too fat to move properly, if at all, in a moral sense. The wife who wants to argue about every little thing is an ancient legend. It's not just the tension at home, but how it insults the community and drags down everyone who sees it, even from a distance.

14. *Houses and riches are the inheritance of fathers, and a prudent wife is from the LORD.* This is a contrast to the previous verse, and an example of dry Hebrew wit. Instead of leaving his inheritance to a stupid heir, having a thriving family economy is a rich heritage from God – implying a wise and industrious household. So is a wife who seizes on the moral imperatives of her divine calling.

15. *Laziness throws one into a deep sleep, and an idle soul shall suffer hunger.* Two flavors of the same basic sin, we see someone who expends more energy in their personal amusement and comfort than anything else. This sense of entitlement will leave you empty handed of even that.

16. *He who keeps the commandment keeps his own soul; he who despises His ways shall die.* Subtle imagery here equates the Covenant Law with life itself. Pursuing the moral character of God as your Lord is in your own best interest.

17. *He who has pity upon the poor lends to the LORD, and He will reward his dealing to him.* Connected to the previous verse, here we see that a critical element of divine justice means you will include charity in your reckoning as offerings to God. It's a general principle that the Lord binds Himself to repay generosity to unfortunate people.

18. *Chasten your son while there is hope, and do not set your soul on making him die.* Some English translations stumble on a Hebrew figure of speech here in the second phrase, but Green translates it well enough. This is the Hebrew sense of “son” as anyone under your authority in any sense. So long as you have the power, and he is still alive, invest yourself in correcting his moral flaws. Don't be so quick to write him off as worthless. Divine justice has a claim on you here.

19. *A man of great wrath shall suffer punishment; for if you deliver him yet you must do it again.* You can almost hear Solomon thinking about his father's complicated relationship with his cousin Joab. While an unparalleled combat leader against the enemy, Joab was almost as cruel to his own troops and even his own family. David paid a heavy moral price for refusing to discipline his cousin. On his deathbed, he made Solomon promise to execute Joab for the long trail of crimes.

20. *Hear advice, and receive instruction, so that you may be wise in your latter end.* This is in some ways little different from the Western expression, “Pay your dues.” Even if your raw talent is off the scale, you still have to find out how God intends to use it.

21. *There are many purposes in a man's heart, but the counsel of the LORD shall stand.* This continues the previous verse. Divine revelation describes how Creation itself operates, so make sure you run your brilliant ideas through the filter of God's Laws.

22. *The charm of a man is his kindness, and a poor man is better than a liar.* The word for “kindness” arises from the idea of courtesy and respect, treating someone else as your equal. This is a charming quality and makes for social stability. In general, those who were poor tended to be respectful in Hebrew society, so it's better to be respectful than to use deceit (false charm) for personal gain.

23. *The fear of the LORD tends to life, and he rests satisfied; he shall not be visited with evil.* Again, pairing nicely with the previous verse, we see that genuine respect for others is associated with

reverence for the God who made all of us. It's part of the same package as taking what life has to offer without unreasonable demands. People who push for every possible entitlement tend to open themselves up for the worst that life can offer.

24. *A lazy one puts his hand in a dish, and he will not return it to his mouth.* Some English translations miss the point here. The image of someone who can't be bothered to feed himself, it's roughly equivalent to the more modern "can't be bothered to wipe his own butt."

25. *Strike a scorner, and the simple will beware; reprove one who has understanding, and he will understand knowledge.* This is actually a subtle contrast. If someone is a mouthy hardhead, punishing him will at least teach others to be more cautious with their words. But if someone is pretty smart, all you have to do is tell him about his mistakes and he'll catch on quickly.

26. *He who assaults his father and chases away his mother is a son who causes shame and brings reproach.* The literal image is shocking, but the point is to warn people not to tolerate someone who won't honor his father and mother, as the Law of Moses requires. Tolerating this in your community is a disgrace to you under the Covenant.

27. *My son, cease to hear the discipline, only to stray from the words of knowledge.* This continues the previous verse by directly addressing the son who would resent his parents' attempts to change his behavior. Don't inject the image of harsh discipline more common in Euro-centric traditions but remember that Hebrew fathers typically invested more time and effort in reasoning with their children. Their culture valued highly voluntary cooperation, not mere conformity.

28. *An ungodly witness scorns judgment, and the mouth of the wicked devours iniquity.* A Hebrew pun, the image here focuses on how we use our mouths. The first phrase describes someone who follows a false god by making funny faces (mouthing) in mockery of Jehovah's moral standards. The second is someone who eats up sheer vanity. In both cases, the mouth is moving and empty.

29. *Judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the back of fools.* Why would a good God think up all these laws with penalties and punishments? Because the world is full of people who aren't as good as God says they could be, were it not for their bad attitudes.

Proverbs 20

This chapter contrasts the difference between judging on the basis of human perception versus relying on the heart to grasp divine moral justice.

1. *Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whoever goes astray by it is not wise.* As a historical note, "strong drink" was likely something akin to beer. This verse is a favorite of the temperance folk who completely fail to grasp Hebrew logic. This does not justify prohibition against beverage alcohol, since there are passages in the same Bible promoting such consumption. In fact, a later proverb openly recommends you drink it precisely for its inebriating quality (ch. 31:6). The point here is to avoid being led astray by that quality by failing to understand our human weakness. Booze is bad company when you have to make a decision.

2. *The fear of a king is as the roaring of a lion; whoever stirs him up to anger sins against his own soul.* The English translation carries connotations that miss the point, made worse by our modern Western assumptions about political authority. The moral context is radically different between our world and Solomon's. In general, you should treat manifestations of political power with some respect. It's the nature of things. There's nothing that says you can't resist a needless threat, like you would a lion too close to your herds, but be aware that provoking a lion for amusement morally forfeits your life – "soul" refers to your mortal existence, not your eternal destiny. You might win the battle but be ready to die.

3. *It is an honor for a man to cease from strife, but every fool exposes himself.* Beautiful imagery here: You make yourself morally substantial by quashing silly conflicts. The second phrase is badly translated. You mark yourself as a fool when you obstinately insist on having your way. The implication is the folly of standing on mere logic and principle against the greater moral demand of social stability.

4. *The lazy one will not plow; after the autumn he shall beg in harvest and have nothing.* This requires you understand the seasons in Palestine, and the KJV is actually a better translation. The cold season comes in October, which is the time for plowing and planting grain. The lazy whine about having to work in cold and damp weather and would surely avoid actually working someone else's fields in harvest, so all they have left is begging. Given that it's likely their community knows them for what they are, what they receive isn't much.

5. *Wisdom in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.* An ancient figure of speech, this depicts the heart as the deep aquifer of moral perception. We are encouraged to get comfortable with the process of dipping into it so that the mind will not struggle under false priorities.

6. *Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, but a faithful man who can find?* Without an ongoing and strong connection to the heart, the human mind is wired to seek a sense of stability, regardless how fragile. When it doesn't plunge into despair and false guilt, the fleshly intellect still tries to reason that we are no worse than anyone else. We call this "moral projection" – painting our normal as universal. That's how the human mind works. It requires the power of heart-mind moral wisdom to actually explore our moral failures and seek God for resolution. Even in ancient times, it seems it was depressingly rare to find folks who were enough at peace with God to be trustworthy long term.

7. *The just walks in his integrity; his sons are blessed after him.* We lose much in translation here. Picture a man going about his daily business. Where he goes and what he does is driven by his moral maturity; we rightly call him "just" in the sense of manifesting God's moral character. Whether literal progeny or not, anyone who takes after that model inherits God's blessings on that man.

8. *A king who sits in the throne of judgment scatters away all evil with his eyes.* The word for "scatter" also carries the idea of winnowing grain. Again, this presumes a godly political system that no longer exists in our time. Rather it serves to define what godly government is by how it works: It sees things from the divine moral perspective and judges accordingly.

9. *Who can say, "I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?"* Moral purity describes a process, not a product. It's the never-ending search for improvement; you live in the Land of Repentance. This has nothing to do with a clear conscience, which is fleeting at best. Your conscience is merely the interface between your brain and your heart; your brain is always learning and will never actually arrive.

10. *Different kinds of weights, different kinds of measures, both are hateful to the LORD.* In literal terms this applies to commerce, but even Western minds recognize scales as a symbol for justice. A literal translation is "a stone and a stone" – two sets of weights and two different sets of dry or liquid measure. In the context of Hebrew society, a significant portion of those in any marketplace would be powerless to protest if they were cheated, but God is always watching.

11. *Even a child is known by his own doings, whether his work is pure and whether it is right.* Westerners tend to hold a very perverse notion about childhood, so the issue is not linguistics but cultural translation here. This refers to any person in the apprentice stage of life, not in the ritual sense of bar-mitzvah, but in the social sense of interacting with people outside the home (age 9+) prior to adulthood. They are held to a different standard, stricter in some areas, looser in others. Still, their moral character is pretty obvious from their actions within that context, and they are taken seriously as future pillars of society. The implication is that we should give others a sporting chance to prove themselves and not judge hastily.

12. *The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made both of them.* And why is it that God gave us these faculties? This is an obvious metaphor for paying attention to the moral context, not boasting in your talents.

13. *Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes and you shall be satisfied with bread.* This is a companion to the previous verse. While the literal meaning is true enough, the moral implication is a call to awaken the mind's link to the heart so you can be aware of your convictions and strive to fulfill them.

14. *"It is bad! Bad," says the buyer; but when it is left to him, then he boasts.* Literally, the buyer proclaims the item evil twice, in the sense that it does more harm than good. Once he gets his hands on it, though, he turns around and boasts what a marvel it is. Common enough in a market where haggling is accepted protocol, this is actually a comment about how people make so much noise over the moral failures of others, only to assert the same actions are righteous when they do them.

15. *There is gold and a multitude of rubies; but the lips of knowledge are a rare jewel.* That last word is better translated as "artwork" – something skillfully made. This is a play on words, as both the lips and artwork are symbols for containers, so the image is someone holding up a golden vase encrusted with precious stones (the word for "rubies" is rather ambiguous) and telling us that saying what people really need to hear at the right moment is far more valuable.

16. *Take the garment of him who is surety for a stranger; and take a pledge from him for strangers.* Making loans on these terms are not a good bet, but divine justice is not measured that way. The Law of Moses specifically requires that you be willing to lend things to your neighbors, and that you further be ready to absorb a loss on such loans. In Hebrew society, your neighbors will

typically be relatives in the first place. If nothing else, the whole nation of Israel was one big family, so there's no excuse for failing to treat any fellow citizen as a brother or sister. Don't fret that your cousin wants to be generous to some outsider. The limitation is in what God places in your hands to offer. You can't magically translate this into Western society, but the idea is to stop scalping folks and playing loan shark, because profit is not your god.

17. *Bread of deceit is sweet to a man, but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel.* The word translated "deceit" here specifically means intent; it's not harmless but meant to defraud. Nobody takes this proverb literally, of course. It's not our concern how or under what terms God turns stolen bread into gravel, but that we know He doesn't ignore these things.

18. *Purposes are established by counsel; and with good advice make war.* Simply living is a war; conflict is hard-wired into our fallen human nature. Stop whimpering about it and make sure you understand what's involved. Both in terms of crafty tactics and in long-term strategy, seek to shed your personal blindness by cultivating folks who see through your personal biases and help you make just choices.

19. *A gossip is a revealer of secrets; so do not mix with him who flatters with his lips.* Perhaps the first phrase would better read, "A scandal-monger strips away your privacy." It's not a question of losing any advantage, but of losing your identity and sense of personal integrity. This is the simple wisdom of not trusting humans, including the person in the mirror. Wise people have no use for an ego massage.

20. *Whoever curses his father or his mother, his lamp shall be put out in deep darkness.* Translation destroys the play on words here. The specific term for "cursing" is making something thinner and lighter, and sometimes by implication, falsely shiny. It doesn't require a direct affront to make fools of your parents. Don't try to look so smart at the expense of those who love you. A lamp wick flares brightly just before the oil runs out and the fire consumes it.

21. *An inheritance gotten hastily in the beginning, even the end of it shall not be blessed.* This echoes the previous verse. It reflects on a fundamental flaw in human nature: Instant gratification destroys the soul. A true sense of moral discernment requires the full awareness of our fallen nature, gained in part by consciously embracing time-space limitations. This becomes paramount in seeking the blessings of *shalom*. Far more than merely your personal property inheritance, this affects the entire fabric of social stability under the Covenant that arises from living according to how Creation actually works.

22. *Do not say, I will repay evil; wait on the LORD, and He will save you.* Do not concern yourself with fixing other people's sin. Even if you are the king, justice is confined to acting in your best discernment to protect your mission from God. Thus, it is never a question of what someone deserves; that's God's domain alone.

23. *Different kinds of weights are hateful to the LORD, and a false balance is not good.* This echoes verse 10 above, but in a slightly different context. Following upon the previous proverb here is the warning not to weigh a response based on improper factors. Don't take it personally even if it was spiteful but consider what will actually stop the harm to *shalom*.

24. *Man's steps are of the LORD; how can a man then understand his own way?* Westerners tend to misread the rhetorical question here. Broadly, we are to regard the net behavior of humanity as steered by God. Do you want to understand where your personal pathway will take you? Your life is part of much larger context. The obvious answer is to rely on the same God who is running all the rest of Creation.

25. *It is a snare to a man to say rashly, "A holy thing," and afterward vows to ask about it.* This requires we understand that the common Hebrew expression of declaring something holy means that it is set aside as an offering to God. It occurs commonly in moments of high emotion, and too often in front of witnesses to impress them. The typical English translation confuses things a bit here, because the second phrase implies in Hebrew that the man goes to inquire of the Lord whether He took the vow seriously.

26. *A wise king scatters the wicked and brings the wheel over them.* This is more a matter of effects, in that royal wisdom typically makes it difficult for people to plot against the throne. Cynicism expects a certain flavor of trouble based on the context and prepares for it as with all the other routine business. The image is that of threshing a harvest of grain; spread it out and crush it with a grinding wheel, so you can find out what was good versus what blows away with the wind.

27. *The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all the inward parts of the belly.* In the Hebrew culture, the belly was the seat of emotions. However, it is not limited to the Western concept of emotions, but more like the broader collection of animal impulses natural to life in this realm of existence. Not necessarily evil, but weak; they are what they are and generally help keep us alive. Not fit to rule, but not to be ignored. The word for "spirit" here is well above the mind; the latter was merely the chief of staff, as it were. The spirit is a far higher faculty directly linked to God's Person, and it is this that rightly rules what is appropriate for the appetites in various contexts.

28. *Mercy and truth preserve the king; and his throne is upheld by mercy.* In the Ancient Near East, a king was just the family chief over a really big family, like a tribe. What kept such a ruler on the throne was a combination of two things. Kindness ("mercy") is necessary when dealing with your family, because if you don't love them, you have no business ruling them. Truth is the quality of being morally consistent and trustworthy. However, the nature of his position rests entirely on mercy, not merely playing at Truth Police. In other words, you must rule from the heart, not merely from reason and logic.

29. *The glory of young men is their strength; and the beauty of old men is the gray head.* The ancients seldom stated it in blunt terms, but they knew instinctively that gray hair was not merely a sign of aging, but a result of having lived through a lot of sorrow. Thus, youth is aflame with physical vigor, but living long enough to talk about it wisely is more precious. Take advantage of vigor while you can but consult with elders how to do it well.

30. *The stripes of a wound cleanses away evil, and strokes the inward parts of the belly.* Figures of speech here translate poorly into English. Within the Covenant context, most of your troubles arise from paying too much attention to your appetites and not enough to what's necessary for

social stability. Truly just punishment doesn't aim at the pain, but at what pain produces in terms of moral adjustments.

Proverbs 21

The specific context here appears in the first verse but bears the broader implication of how we deal with the sorrows of human society in general. Divine wisdom is often silent in the face of apparent provocation, seeking whatever path remains open to share blessings.

1. *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD as the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He will.*

Addressed to those who aren't the king, this applies equally regardless of the form of government. That's because it is not a doctrinal statement about government, but an admonition how we should act before any human authority: treat it like a river, a feature of the natural landscape in which you reside. There are things you might do to change the course of a river, or even dam the flow, but you had better know for sure what God requires of you in the context, because the investment of resources to change it will be huge, and risks very high. For most things, it's easier to simply work with the situation as is; otherwise you might find yourself fighting God Himself.

2. *Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD ponders the hearts.* Nearly identical to 16:2, the context here specifically addresses how easily people justify various forms of hatred and rebellion against government officials. Don't react merely on the basis of your personal discomfort, as if every inconvenience arises from personal spite. Try to grasp the wider context, both on the social level and the moral level, before you decide what to do about it.

3. *To do justice and judgment is more pleasing to the LORD than sacrifice.* Not so different from the sentiments in 15:8, the point here continues from the context of the preceding two verses. The wording emphasizes both the theory and execution of divine moral justice as the theme of life itself, against the image of trying to buy God off.

4. *A high look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin.* There's delicious imagery easily missed through translation. Stirring up strife ("plowing") for personal gain is always wrong. Some people work very hard in pursuit of their lusts, craftily waiting until their efforts bear fruit. But it's just as evil as blundering about with an insufferable arrogance that offends from the start.

5. *The thoughts of the diligent tend only to plenty; but the thoughts of everyone who is hasty only to poverty.* This is intentionally paired with the previous verse. Regardless of your motives, hard work still bears more fruit than impulsiveness.

6. *The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro by those who seek death.* This is a figure of speech. Some people are very proud of their ability to manipulate and scam others out of material goods, but the attitude itself means they are already dead souls. The subtext is that people can know the price of things and the value of nothing.

7. *The robbery of the wicked shall destroy them, because they refuse to do judgment.* Here is an obvious companion to the previous verse. If your predatory skills are limited to physical violence

instead of a smooth tongue, your violence will return upon your head. Defying justice is inherently violent. The image of destruction here can be associated with a cow chewing its cud; sometimes divine justice takes a while, but you have to trust God for things you cannot see.

8. *The way of a guilty man is perverted; but the pure, his work is right.* Again, the subtlety is lost in translation here. If you deny your own conscience, you'll be driven by forces you don't understand down a very unpredictable path. If you seek a clear conscience, the results of your life will be consistent and reliable.

9. *It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop than with a quarrelsome woman and to share a house.* Noteworthy here is that there is nothing wrong with a woman who zealously defends her man in public, as was typical of Hebrew women. It's when she's a bitch at home that it shows a serious moral flaw. The subtle implication is that it's a good idea to flush her out before committing to a bad marriage. Otherwise, it's better to live alone in a rented attic room so that you can still pursue your divine calling.

10. *The soul of the wicked desires evil; his neighbor finds no favor in his eyes.* Here is a rich imagery about perception. The emphasis is that you learn not to trust someone who lives for their perversions. It doesn't matter if they seem friendly; your only value to them is purely mercenary. Also, the words for "wicked" and "neighbor" sound very similar, which counts as a pun in Hebrew.

11. *When the scorner is punished, the simple is made wise; and when the wise is instructed, he receives knowledge.* This is much simpler than it appears in translation. Only after you can get someone's attention can you teach him.

12. *The righteous wisely considers the house of the wicked; but God overthrows the wicked for their wickedness.* This one is a little difficult for its ambiguity. Neither the name nor word for "God" appears in the Hebrew, only the masculine pronoun. However, we don't see "righteous one" as a title for God anywhere else in Proverbs; it's usually a righteous human. Whoever it is here, he has the authority to execute judgment. The main point here is that righteous wisdom does not act rashly but acts thoroughly after considering the entire context ("house" as in one's entire domain).

13. *Whoever stops his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard.* English lacks the subtlety for this, as the Hebrew uses two different words for "cry." Further, Westerners have a poor concept of charity. Beggars in the Ancient Near East followed customary protocols in how they called out for donations. You always had the option of treating them as background noise because they would never confront you, nor even make eye contact as you passed; they were strangers with no claim on your attention. Thus, you could privately drop a coin for private reasons, or not. The Covenant echoes common moral conceptions that giving to beggars was based on what you could afford and was part of the ritual sacrificial system. If someone was family, you could approach them directly and ask for specific help with a presumption they would dig more deeply into their pockets. Thus, the image here is that if you are cold hearted enough to ignore common beggars, you will alienate yourself from your own relatives.

14. *A gift in secret quiets anger; and a bribe in the bosom quiets strong wrath.* We've seen this before in 18:16, and the word translated "bribe" can be any form of tribute. The emphasis here is on discretion. If you feel the need to endear yourself to someone powerful, never do it publicly, because it tends to humiliate the recipient. He may feel obliged to reject your overtures for the sake of reputation. Your gifts should be private so that the person in power retains the option of deciding freely whether to exercise mercy on you. In case you didn't think it through, the same goes with charity to the poor and powerless. Trust in God to reward you.

15. *It is joy to the just to do judgment, but ruin shall be to the workers of iniquity.* This is actually connected to the previous verse. Divine moral justice is its own reward. Otherwise, you are just putting on a show and whatever you hope to gain will evaporate.

16. *The man who wanders out of the way of understanding shall rest in the assembly of departed spirits.* This is an ancient figure of speech. The Hebrew word for "understanding" emphasizes the idea of circumspection, a grasp of what's appropriate for the context. Thus, the statement is a virtual truism in the Ancient Near East as a whole: Context is everything. The "assembly of departed spirits" is a euphemism for the grave or a graveyard.

17. *He who loves pleasure shall be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil shall not be rich.* It should be obvious from the context, but the Hebrew word translated "love" here typically refers to mere sexual desire, not an honest affection. Wine and oil become symbols for a luxurious and carefree life here.

18. *The wicked shall be a ransom for the righteous, and the transgressor for the upright.* This is obviously not meant literally. The Hebrew word translated here as "ransom" is a complex image based on the idea of protection against the random sorrows of this life. Sinners generally fail to grasp the moral fabric of reality in the first place, so might not notice how they tend to absorb a bigger share of human suffering in a way that protects those who do operate from the heart.

19. *It is better to dwell in the wilderness than with a quarrelsome and angry woman.* Echoing verse 9 above, this emphasizes home life. Perhaps here we sense a note of wistfulness, the wise words of someone who has lived too long with a woman who did not admire the man she married, and lived from her nesting instinct instead of from her heart. Then again, Hebrew culture bears an affinity for the simple life, though often romanticized. They knew it was easier to be faithful to God when there were no expectations for soft living.

20. *A desirable treasure and oil are in the home of the wise; but a foolish man swallows it up.* The imagery translates poorly, because "treasure" covers the whole range of durable goods normally collected in a household, while "oil" represents consumables. It's not that you are wise to collect these things, but that wise people tend to avoid wasteful living, while fools too quickly trade tomorrow for today's pleasure. The modern images that come to mind are "consumer debt" and living beyond one's means.

21. *He who follows after righteousness and mercy finds life, righteousness, and honor.* In the first phrase, Hebrew thinking equates righteousness and mercy. It's neither having nor finding so much as embracing the fundamental nature of life itself. If you live a heart-led existence that

keeps trying to see moral justice in everything, you'll find it. Word order matter matters in the second phrase, because moral justice is always in the company of a vigorous "life" and genuine meaning ("honor" as in substantial).

22. *A wise one scales the city of the mighty and brings down the strength of its hope.* Another that suffers some in translation, this proverb paints the image of a fortified city run by a very able military tyrant. Genuine wisdom will always find the vulnerability in ordinary human security; wisdom is stronger than strength.

23. *Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps his soul from troubles.* This echoes of 13:3 but refers to much more than merely what you say. The wording here addresses what you eat and your whole sense of taste, as well. Don't trust your flesh, which includes your intellect.

24. *Proud, haughty scorner is his name, he who deals in proud wrath.* Western culture has a perverted idea about niceness and doesn't understand the moral justice in being firm and fierce at times. This verse refers to insufferable arrogance that presumes a far larger dominion than God has delivered into one's hands. Some people treat everyone else like trash and this is what's wrong, particularly in an ancient culture that placed such a high value on not taking yourself too seriously. Who wants the reputation for being a complete ass?

25-26. *The desire of the lazy man kills him, for his hands have refused to work. He covets greedily all the day long; but the righteous gives and spares not.* These two verses are a single proverb offering a rich contrast. The fundamental nature of indolence is a sense of entitlement – having what you want shouldn't be so much work. This is what's deadly about laziness, and it's an affliction on everyone around you. The lazy man obsesses about suffering this false sense of injustice, while the righteous man obsesses about making things just for others. The righteous don't whine about what should be but strives to make it so. Moral justice is its own reward.

27. *The sacrifice of the wicked is hateful to God; how much more when he brings it with a wicked mind?* It's bad enough that some will engage covenant rituals simply to avoid social pressures. Empty gestures are an insult to God. How much worse it is when they use symbols of moral justice as the cover for an evil plot.

28. *A false witness shall perish, but the man who hears speaks on and on.* This suffers in translation. If you tend to deceive, the ultimate exposure of your lies is morality itself; you'll be a forgotten nobody. The image is a flood of deceptive blather, a symbol of too busy lying to hear or give room for anyone else to get a word in edgewise. The contrast is someone who pays attention and doesn't have to have everything his way. His life of truth will speak long after he is dead.

29. *A wicked man hardens his face, but the upright establishes his way.* The subtle humor here is the contrast between struggling to keep up a hard shell versus investing carefully in a strong foundation. Immorality is built on deception, so it requires a lot of trouble keeping up a solid appearance. Moral justice doesn't worry about the storms of life because what really matters can't be washed away.

30. *There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD.* The Hebrew word translated "against" here is much broader in its root meaning. It paints the image of coming into God's Presence with opposition. It's not a mere question of failure as in, "this isn't too wise."

Rather, it simply doesn't happen. If you come into God's Presence at all, it's crawling on your face, humble and penitent. Thus, the proverb means you can't argue with God's revelation because that's arguing against fundamental reality itself.

31. *The horse is prepared for the day of battle; but safety is from the LORD.* About the only use for a horse in the Ancient Near East was in battle or ceremonies that referenced martial power. It meant a very high investment in resources and time. If you anticipate human conflict, you wisely prepare for the worst. However, whether your resources are much or little, victory comes from the hand of God. If He means to bring you down, nothing you do will save you, but if He wants to defeat whole armies of enemies with just a choir, He can do it.

Proverbs 22

In his better moments, Solomon was struck by the realization that much of what made life so sweet under his father's reign was fading away. Some of it was buried under the wash of foreign influences his fame brought to Jerusalem, so he surely realized that his own hands shared in the guilt. Perhaps he saw the sorrows his own heir would cause many, because Rehoboam lacked the depth character that comes from facing life with only your moral sensibilities against very little physical comfort. Thus, the theme of this chapter is guarding the ancient treasures from loss.

1. *A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches; and loving favor rather than silver or gold.* From the depths of the Ancient Near Eastern cultures, it was long regarded as the highest mark of divine favor that one should possess an established unique moral character. Perhaps it is God's sense of humor on us today that the Hebrew word for that (*shem*) is pronounced "shame." It would be easy for someone in Solomon's court to get lost in the material opulence and forget how it symbolized God's rich blessings in granting him such a grand moral discernment.

2. *The rich and poor meet together; the LORD is the maker of them all.* This is connected to the previous verse. Whence the designations of rich and poor? Who decides what qualifies a man for either label? Everyone stands before the Creator as mere creature, so it is His regard that matters.

3. *A prudent one foresees the evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished.* Along the same lines as the previous, this is rather equivalent to realizing when to cut your losses based on what really matters. If you can discern the approach of sorrow, don't waste time arguing with God and trying to negotiate over stuff He can replace, just take the obvious morally appropriate action. A fool by definition blunders through this world paying no attention to moral considerations. Will they recognize God's wrath for what it is?

4. *By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches and honor and life.* The first word here – "by" – misses the rich flavor in the original term: the heel of something, the end result. We tend to read this English translation with the wrong cultural baggage holding us back. The last phrase is a figure of speech for *shalom* – the promised blessings of God's moral law. Those things were symbolic; nice to have, but if you don't seek God's mercy and favorable regard, they won't do

much for you. The comforts God offers in this life take on the wrong meaning if they don't arise as the end result of embracing His moral character.

5. *Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse; he who keeps his soul shall be far from them.* We might not call it a pun, but the Hebrew imagery here is humorous, relying heavily on the wide concept of what is natural, what is built into this world by God's design. In Creation, thorns serve to warn you off. Sin here is pictured as perversity, of twisting what God gave us, pushing against thorns and ripping your life to shreds as they hold you fast. What's funny is that to "keep" one's soul arises from the Hebrew concept of thorns as a protective hedge.

6. *Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it.* As usual, rich imagery here does not translate. Children in Hebrew culture represent raw talent and a wealth of natural urges that can get you into trouble. They can be beautiful, wild and free, but likely dead soon if you don't help them discover God's intentions for everything. Thus, the Hebrew term for training is to trim something, cutting and pressing extraneous projections that will get caught on natural threats. The path of life requires we manage to fit ourselves through narrow portals with as little struggle as we can manage. Train them well and they won't struggle, feeling lost at the end of life.

7. *The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.* This is one of those pithy reminders to consider the implications of your choices. Rather than impart some kind of moral condemnation on political power, this proverb simply notes how such power is gained, whether good or ill. In general, rich folks can buy influence. But when you borrow for any reason, you have sold some part of your future to the lender.

8. *He who sows iniquity shall reap vanity; and the rod of his anger shall fail.* This is a play on words about progeny. You cannot build a blessed future by taking moral shortcuts at the start. Pay your dues early and endure the discomfort and inconvenience of maintaining moral justice with an eye to social stability. Otherwise, you'll be on the wrong track, and what you leave for your kids to inherit won't be worth anything. You'll end up frustrated and morally powerless. The word "rod" means both scepter as a symbol of authority and as a figure of speech for your heirs; it's a general concept of one's dominion, legacy and estate.

9. *He who has a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he gives of his bread to the poor.* Without the cultural context, this can lead to a false morality. In Solomon's world, the fundamental frame of reference was Ancient Near Eastern feudal structure in human society. The "everyman" figure was someone who was head of his household, never mind how rich or poor his private dominion might be. Additionally, the eye was not just a matter of sight, but of perception. If your perception assumes that God has granted you a rich domain with the feudal expectation that you will use it to bring Him fame and glory, then you will have no trouble with generosity and taking proper care of those who are dependent on you ("the poor"). In return, your divine Sheikh will show you great favor. Westerners are clueless about the moral frame of reference in which God decides who is your dependent.

10. *Cast out the scorner, and fighting shall go out; yes, quarrels and shame shall cease.* This rests on an ancient image of dispossession, rather like Israel's conquest of the Promised Land. The unjust squatter to drive out is someone who stirs up trouble, typically by bullying and mocking,

someone who doesn't understand the proper use of human speech. Thus, when they leave, a huge load of dissension and fighting goes with them. The image of "fighting" is lawsuits, complaints lodged against each other before some authority, along with the resulting shame of someone who cannot rule his own home in peace.

11. *He who loves pureness of heart, grace is on his lips; the king shall be his friend.* As a general principle of human politics, knowing how to say the right thing at the right time will keep you in favor with those in power. You can fake it, but that's hard work and too easily fails at the worst moment. Better it is to gain it honestly, and the best way to do that is to genuinely love the moral guidance of a heart that suffers no confusion about who is God.

12. *The eyes of the LORD keep knowledge, and He overthrows the words of the transgressor.* This is a humorous play on words in that "keep" can imply hiding something or making it mysterious, while "transgressor" arises from the concept of sly or sneaky. The latter is superficial, while the former is far more even than existential. This is highlighted by the contrast between God's knowledge in the sense of awareness that takes in all Creation versus the intent of the sneak that tends to consume his awareness. You can't fool God.

13. *The lazy one says, "There is a lion outside; I shall be killed in the streets."* This is preposterous for the obvious reason that some people will use any excuse, even making one up if necessary, to avoid something they find unpleasant. "Wait; what was that noise I heard outside?" In this context, it becomes the excuse for avoiding the effort to obey God's command to invest oneself into truly understanding His Word by doing it.

14. *The mouth of strange women is a deep pit; those despised by the LORD shall fall there.* This is an obvious reference to adultery. In this context, the emphasis is on distraction from duty. A man's lusts can wreck his moral priorities and there is no shortage of folks who want something from you. Guard yourself from plunging into God's disfavor because it's awfully hard to escape.

15. *Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.* In our natural state we are senseless and destructive. There is a fundamental moral necessity for humans to develop beyond that natural state, to fight against the sickness of the Fall. This is the whole point in revelation. The process cannot be made painless.

16. *He who crushes the poor to multiply for himself, and he who gives to the rich, only to come to poverty.* This echoes a very ancient fundamental understanding that we mistake for some kind of Robin Hood ethic. In the ancient world, virtually everyone you encountered was some degree of kin folks. Your neighbors were family. There were distinct moral boundaries between how you treated strangers and your own kind. You were decent with strangers until they proved themselves a threat, but it was shocking to oppress your own cousins just because God had granted you some small advantage. Blessings were meant to be shared, not further concentrated into fewer hands in defiance of the conditions laid down by God in His Law. Defiance of Law is defiance against nature itself, and you should expect unpleasant consequences in the long run.

We take a moment here to note that scholars detect starting here and half-way through the next chapter a strong similarity between this and some proverbs recorded in Egyptian wisdom literature (specifically, *Instruction of Amenemope*). It reads very much like a direct insertion of

different material. Solomon hardly hides the extent of his borrowing as a collector of proverbs. The other scholars who divided this work into chapters and verses were keeping an eye on themes, not source material. They seemed unaware that some of the following material should have been kept together in larger chunks, but they still understood the apparent context of how Solomon used it, because the original author wrote for his own heir.

17-21. *Bow down your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to My knowledge. For it is a pleasant thing if you keep them within you; they shall all be fitted in your lips, so that your trust may be in the LORD, I have made known to you this day, even to you. Have I not written to you excellent things in counsels and knowledge, that I might make you know the sureness of the words of truth; to return the words of truth to those who send to you?* This is a formulaic introduction to the section following. However, it is also a general statement about the value of wisdom literature itself. Proverbs were meant to summon up a frame of reference wherein you stop your mind running off without considering what the convictions in your heart have to say. Keep things in a moral perspective.

22-23. *Do not rob the poor, because he is poor; nor press down the afflicted in the gate; for the LORD will plead their cause, and strip the soul of those who plunder them.* This a play on words because the Hebrew for “strip” includes the idea of plunder. Whether seeking justice or simply as beggars, people hung out in city gates because that’s where they were most likely to be noticed. You may well get away with oppressing such folk in material terms, but you will destroy your soul and make of yourself an empty husk. Those who still operate from the heart will discern you quickly and avoid you.

24-25. *Make no friendship with an angry man; and you shall not go up with a man of fury, lest you learn his ways and get a snare to your soul.* The translation tends to trivialize the imagery and misses some of the humor. Don’t play fellow shepherd with someone whose only mastery is having a bad attitude; don’t wander with someone led by their appetite for outrage. This is not a good apprenticeship, because it simply leaves your life hanging by a noose.

26-27. *Be not one of those who strike hands, of those who are sureties for debts. If you have nothing to pay, why should he take away your bed from under you?* This echoes the previous proverb in terms of investment. To “strike hands” is a figure of speech for making deals and binding yourself under contracts of partnership. The context implies that you provide funding for another man’s venture plans. This is more than just a warning about being a sucker, but Westerners cannot comprehend how fundamentally immoral it is. Biblical morality insists that you work your investments with your own hands unless the investment is so trivial you can afford to throw it away – you won’t lose sleep over it. By the same token, an entrepreneur should never make himself beholden to investors who don’t share his sense of divine calling.

28. *Do not remove the old landmark which your fathers have set.* Ancient folk didn’t carve up the land using mathematical precision; it was too easy to dispute. Rather, they established boundaries based on natural features. When such were lacking, they would bring together the interested parties and ritually establish some symbolic marker. It became a de facto covenant sworn before God, as if He were the enforcing sovereign. You wouldn’t move it without repeating the entire process. Such markers became the symbol of moral boundaries for obvious

reasons. Any man can sneak up at night and move the stone, or do so incrementally over a long period, and humans might not notice. God is watching and His moral character does not change with the winds of human attention.

29. *Do you see a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before unknown men.* Again, the subtlety is lost in cultural translation. The word for “business” arises from the concept of an appointed duty under a higher authority. This is hardly the image of some slavish yes-man, because in Solomon’s world everyone serves some higher feudal authority, almost invariably one of your kin. It was a personal bond, not a mere contract. Somebody has to take responsibility to those above him, so if you take seriously the importance of being one less thing he has to worry about, because you are a living solution instead of a consuming problem, you’ll go far in this world. It’s not a question of actual success, but attitude.

Proverbs 23

This chapter continues the theme of the previous, in which an aging ruler seeks to warn his heir from folly. We continue with the longer statements in small paragraphs.

1-3. *When you sit down to eat with a ruler, look carefully at what is before you; and put a knife to your throat, if you are a man given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceitful food.*

Cynicism is not your soul, but your friend. All the more so should you keep cynicism close when in the presence of human authorities. Don’t just swallow whatever they give you; pay close attention and consider everything carefully. With rulers, manipulation is the norm. It’s not the same as calling every ruler evil, but that it is simply a part of their position. Note that if you don’t suck up to them, they are more likely to treat you with respect.

4-5. *Do not labor to be rich; cease from your own understanding. Will your eyes fly on it? And it is gone! For surely it makes wings for itself; it flies into the heavens like an eagle.* Ancient figures of speech don’t translate easily here. This continues the theme of cynicism by applying it to yourself. Don’t be a sucker to your own apparent success. Always assume you are missing something critical; not in the sense of paranoid obsessions, but you should always seek counsel from those who see things differently. That warm glow of satisfaction can fly away suddenly when your accomplishment turns out to be worthless against the reality of unanticipated difficulties.

6-8. *Do not eat the bread of him who has an evil eye, nor desire his dainty foods; for as he thinks in his heart, so is he. “Eat and drink,” he says to you, but his heart is not with you. Your bit which you have eaten, you shall vomit up, and spoil your pleasant words.* More of the noble cynicism should teach you it’s better to go hungry than accept support from someone who operates from spite. The English confuses things by translating two different words as “heart.” A spiteful man does not think with his heart; the first occurrence of the word is *nephesh*, more often translated as “soul” and implies a lower level of awareness, of mere intellect and reason. Since such a man ignores the moral understanding of his heart, then surely his heart is not with you. You may well suffer his spite yourself for rejecting his enticements, but it’s better than weakening your position by the taint of his fellowship.

9. *Do not speak in the ears of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of your words.* This is a companion to the previous paragraph. The word for “speak” means to explain something. This reflects the broader wisdom of keeping your mouth shut until you have people’s attention. A fool pays attention only to his personal fantasies and is angered when someone deflates them and makes him feel like the fool he is. There’s not much you can do for such people.

10-11. *Do not remove the old landmarks, and do not enter into the fields of the fatherless; for their Redeemer is mighty; He shall plead their cause with you.* The image of “the fatherless” is the ultimate symbol of those who are the easiest targets for abuse; no one seems to care if they are treated unjustly. Perhaps the best cultural equivalent for this proverb today is shattering the illusion of entitlement. There’s nothing wrong with reassessing traditions if you seek to understand what they protect in moral terms. But too often people are seeking only an excuse to fulfill their own lusts, and such an examination turns into a legalistic exercise in moral perversion. Change archaic customs, but don’t attack the divine moral justice behind them. There is a Creator who stands behind His own moral character woven into Creation.

12. *Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to the words of knowledge.* This is a customary closing that marks the end of Solomon’s quotation from the Egyptian source. This is the standard recognition that the heart-mind is the proper center of our existence in this fallen realm of existence. When the focus of your awareness is on that higher level of eternal moral convictions, your ears will be attuned to ideas in the mind that support God’s moral character. Solomon continues in the same style, echoing a wider wisdom established well before his time.

13-16. *Do not withhold correction from a boy, for if you beat him with the rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with the rod, and shall deliver his soul from hell. My son, if your heart is wise, my heart shall rejoice, even mine. Yea, my heart shall rejoice when your lips speak right things.* This follows directly on the previous admonition. Again, the Ancient Near Eastern concept of human nature is something not necessarily evil as it is fallen and in need of moral boundaries. The term for “rod” is contextually more like a switch. Once a human develops to the point they can grasp the notion of a heart-led existence, they don’t need much correction of that sort, but it takes considerable years of experience to develop that moral wisdom that would make a father rejoice.

17-18. *Do not let your heart envy sinners; but be in the fear of the LORD all the day long. For surely there is a hereafter, and your hope shall not be cut off.* Continuing along the same line of thought, it’s entirely possible for your heart to take the wrong path, too. While we don’t have any sort of clinical terminology for it, the Hebrews surely understood it, referring to a darkened heart. Thus, the warning here is to avoid such darkness by choosing your models carefully. Be conscious of who your heroes are, in terms of how well they represent the revelation of God. While the Hebrew term translated “hereafter” is ambiguous, only with a Western bias would anyone imagine the Hebrew people didn’t believe in a Spirit Realm wholly separate from this level of existence, a place where your standing with God made all the difference, a difference we tend not to see so clearly here below.

19-28. *My son, hear and be wise, and guide your heart in the way. Do not be among those who drink much wine, among gluttons for flesh for themselves, for the drunkard and the glutton lose all, and*

sleepiness shall clothe a man with rags. Listen to your father who sired you, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding. The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice; and he who fathers a wise child shall have joy from him. Your father and your mother shall be glad, and she who bore you shall rejoice. My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes watch my ways. For a harlot is a deep ditch, and a strange woman is a narrow pit. She also lies in wait as for prey, and increases the treacherous among men. Solomon lays it on thick here because the danger is so very great. One of the quickest ways to destroy everything that matters on this earth is through dissipation, and it's much worse for rulers because they bear the guilt of destroying everyone they rule at the same time. Thus, the appeal here is first personal: "Don't crap on your mother and I, son." The two primary concerns are drunkenness and skirt chasing.

29-35. *Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has fighting? Who has babbling? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who stay long at the wine, those who go to seek mixed wine. Do not look upon the wine when it is red, when it gives its color in the cup, when it goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like an asp and stings like an adder. Your eyes shall look upon strange women and your heart shall speak perverse things. Yes, you shall be as one who lies down in the middle of the sea, or as one who lies upon the top of a mast, saying, "They struck me; I was not sick; they beat me, but I did not know it. When I awaken, I will add more. I will seek it again."* The same warning as the previous paragraph continues under the appeal to self-interest. Here Solomon shows how the two greatest threats are intertwined. Drunkenness leads to adultery, and the stress from that can lead to more drunkenness. Nobody in the Old Testament condemned sex or wine in themselves, but like every other good thing from God, it's too easy to make lesser things your god. Lust can pervert the message you hear from your heart.

Proverbs 24

We continue with more pointed advice to the royal heir in longer proverbial texts.

1-2. *Do not be jealous of evil men, nor desire to be with them. For their heart studies ruin, and their lips talk of mischief.* This repeats the warning about choosing carefully your heroes. There's a bit of color with the Hebrew word for "jealous" that is taken from the idea of zeal and excitement for something. This is followed by the word for "desire" which is more than mere lust, but coveting. These are paralleled with the word translated "studies," which is based on the idea of murmuring with pleasure over something — all synonyms in this context.

3-6. *Through wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; and by knowledge the rooms shall be filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is strong; yes, a man of knowledge increases strength. For by wise counsel you shall make your war; and in a multitude of wise men there is safety.* The context specifically points toward establishing a dynasty with figures of speech for founding and erecting a palace. Filling it with a king's treasures naturally means sooner or later taking plunder from some enemy who challenges you. Ruling well is a particular talent and calling. But the emphasis is not so much on having your own wisdom, as if you can trust your own talents alone, but the utter necessity of gathering and using the advice of people with even

more talent in other areas of expertise. This comes from the hand of Solomon, reputedly the wisest of humans.

7-9. *Wisdom is too high for a fool; he does not open his mouth in the gate. He who plots to do evil shall be called a master of wicked thoughts. The thought of foolishness is sin; and the scorner is hateful to men.*

The point here is not obvious from translation. Solomon advises his son to make it so that folly and wickedness don't have an easy path. Draw out the best in your subjects. Encourage an atmosphere that keeps frauds from having any hope of influencing things; make them a laughingstock in the civil courts that gather at every village and city gate. Make predatory plotting expensive and difficult.

10. *If you faint in the day of trial, your strength is small.* The image here is risqué: If you aren't thrilled with a tight place, your manhood must be too small to fill it. Real men are adventurous and thrive in adversity. There's a pun in the Hebrew words translated "trial" (*tsarah* — a tight spot) and "small" (*tsar* — to be tight).

11-12. *Deliver those being taken to death, and those stumbling to be killed, unless you hold back. If you say, "Behold, we did not know;" does not He who searches the heart consider it? And the Keeper of your soul, does He know? And He repays to a man according to his works?* Our translation here is a bit rough. The idea is that a wise king will insist on reviewing every death sentence in his domain, because the stakes are too high. Not in the perverted Western sense of value on human life as an economic asset, but the issue is clinging to the moral character of Jehovah, ensuring that executions meet a genuine moral need (*shalom* — social stability). A king can't pretend he didn't know because God holds him accountable for keeping enough loyal servants to have eyes throughout his domain, because you can be sure God is watching.

13-14. *My son, eat honey, because it is good; and the honeycomb, is sweet to your palate; so shall the knowledge of wisdom be to your soul; when you have found it, then there shall be a reward, and your hope shall not be cut off.* This highly lyrical image tells us that moral wisdom is its own reward. Sure, you'll reap God's promised blessings under the Covenant, but see through those more obvious rewards to the sweetness of moral purity in itself.

15-16. *Wicked one, do not lie in ambush at the dwelling of the righteous; do not spoil his resting place; for a just one falls seven times, and rises up again; but the wicked shall fall into evil.* This repeats the previous proverb from a different angle: Moral purity is power. The driving conviction of God's moral truth will push you through all kinds of predatory human evil. People who do evil can't possibly have that kind of drive; they'll give up when the fleshly costs outweigh the gains. The deepest, most vile hatred will die with the flesh, but moral wisdom is eternal.

17-18. *Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the LORD see, and it displease Him, and He turn away His wrath from him.* Moral discernment cannot give birth to childish spite. If you embrace God's moral character, you will most certainly have enemies among your own family. That same moral wisdom teaches you sadness, not hatred. You'll still have all the power you need to defeat them, but don't let yourself slip into enjoying the grisly task of destroying threats to your shalom. Implied is that you rejoice instead when your enemy repents.

19-20. *Do not fret yourself because of evil ones, nor be jealous of the wicked; for there shall be not be a hereafter to the evil; the lamp of the wicked shall be put out.* This is a statement flatly supporting the concept of afterlife. Such may not have been universal among Hebrew people at large, but those whose hearts actively ruled their thinking could not avoid an awareness of the Spirit Realm. The mere fact that you can discern moral evil in this life is blessing enough, should it come down to that. People lacking such discernment are also blind to their awful fate.

21-22. *My son, fear the LORD and the king; and do not fellowship with those who are given to change; for their trouble shall rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin of them both?* This includes a figure of speech difficult to translate. Fear in the sense of reverence is fairly obvious, but it always included the idea of firm moral consistency. Thus, the implication of “change” here is someone who lacks character and moral substance, someone likely to shift with the wind. It’s one thing to keep your mouth shut when there’s no point in talking, but that’s not the same as just going along with every variation in the context. Find solid ground and take a stand.

23-26. *These also are for the wise: To have respect of persons in judgment is not good. He who says to the wicked, “You are righteous;” the people shall curse him and nations shall abhor him. But to those who rebuke him, it shall be a delight, and a good blessing shall come upon them. He shall kiss the lips that return right words.* We easily forget that “respect of persons” is an ancient phrase referring to partiality for public figures. It undermines all your moral authority when you suck up to someone just because they are famous. That fame may be a false cover over all kinds of evil. Don’t fool yourself; whoever among your subjects bears their own strong moral perception will see through you. This is consistent with the declaration, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” God will carry you through any political fallout for His glory.

27. *Prepare your work outside, and make it fit for yourself in the field; and afterwards build your house.* Secure your borders before you worry about comfort. This represents a whole range of things a royal heir must undertake, because he can’t be his father. He needs to have seen with his own eyes and established alliances or identified enemies personally as his first priority for as long as he holds the throne, not simply in the sense of doing it and forgetting about it. A king will never lack for challenge to his authority.

28-29. *Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause, nor deceive with your lips. Do not say, “I will do so to him as he has done to me; I will give to the man according to his work.”* This is the other half of, “Vengeance is Mine says the Lord.” Specifically, don’t manufacture a pretext for getting even with those unjust with you. Rather, pursue justice itself as the glory of God and let Him take care of things that don’t fall directly into your hand.

30-34. *I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man without understanding; and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face of it, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw; I set my heart on it; I looked and I received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to lie down; then your poverty comes stalking, and your want like an a man armed with a shield.* In this context of instruction for a future king, this is a picturesque warning about letting your guard down. If the man owning a vineyard is lazy, the vineyard suffers and he has no fruit. If a king is lazy he soon has no realm. Don’t rest on your title.

Proverbs 25

We have already seen how the unnamed final editor of this volume never saw fit to reduce duplication, but faithfully pieced together several collections as they were.

1. *These are also proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.* We should hardly be surprised that periodic revivals of wisdom literature came and went in the history of Israel, particularly arising from the legendary reign of Solomon. King Hezekiah ruled almost two centuries after Solomon. His reign was characterized by a grand effort to recover the legacy of greatness, in part through a sincere and concerted search for oral and written records long neglected. Not just a catalog, but these were republished in fresh copies. Chapters 25-29 are the results of their efforts to ensure nothing from Solomon's proverbs was lost. This collection offers the theme of calling for a sense of perspective and not taking oneself too seriously. We get the strong sense Hezekiah's time saw a bad habit of self-indulgence among members of the ruling class.

2. *The glory of God is to hide a thing; but the honor of kings is to search out a matter.* God emanates a blinding glory from His Person. Among other things, His glory demands that we leave our fallen nature behind lest it devour us. The path out of destruction is His revelation, but it requires something of us to reach beyond our plane of existence into a boundary layer between Spirit and Flesh where we can explore His moral character. Thus, insofar as we can know Him, it is found with some effort, a measure of self-death undertaken through the various Law Covenants. It is "hidden" in that sense. The mission of a king is to lead the way in clarifying what can be known of God on our level through Covenant Law. A king who does not know God in that sense cannot rightly claim the honor God invested in the mission.

3. *The heavens for height, and the earth for depth, but the heart of kings is without searching.* This is a pragmatic statement following on the previous verse. Should a king take his mission seriously, he will be changed. You should expect to find him rather mysterious, full of surprises to the day he dies.

4-5. *Take away the dross from the silver, and there shall come forth a vessel for the refiner. Take away the wicked from before the king, and his throne shall be founded in righteousness.* The first line reflects a common mistranslation. If you refine silver, you typically get an ingot, not a vessel. The ingot goes to a craftsman ("finer") who makes it into things like vessels. The point is that these are two entirely separate skills at work. A king is still human and needs the support of genuine heart-led servants, not a bunch of courtesans seeking self-advantage, if he's going to rule in wisdom and justice.

6-7. *Do not put yourself forth in the presence of the king, and do not stand in the place of the great; for it is better that it should be said to you, "Come up here," than that you should be put lower in the presence of a noble whom your eyes have seen.* Most people will recognize that this is where Jesus got his comments for castigating rabbis who jockeyed over precise social rankings at dinners, as if the host had no say in the matter (Luke 14:7-14). Don't presume; don't take yourself so seriously or you will end up with even less social status than before. More broadly, play that part given you by those with higher authority, because they have to explain to God how they wasted His blessings.

8. *Do not go forth quickly to fight, lest you know not what to do in the end of it, when your neighbor has put you to shame. Debate your cause with your neighbor; and do not uncover a secret to another, lest he who hears it put you to shame, and your evil report turn not away.* It may not be obvious that this refers to dragging people into court simply because you are personally offended over some private incident. The effort to expose and shame someone else for petty grievances can backfire. When your mind runs in that direction, it's very hard to estimate what you will expose of yourself that may be even more shameful.

11-12. *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver. As a ring of gold, and an ornament of fine gold, so is a wise reprover upon a hearing ear.* Two nearly identical proverbs, the translation of the first is a little clumsy. The word "pictures" also refers to mounting or setting in fine craftsmanship. The image is a discrete warning to someone who might have forgotten, or never been quite aware, of the context as they prepare to speak inappropriately. By the same token, don't be a fool in assuming everyone is stupid and can't make it without your supervision. Make sure you know what's going on before you deliver your stirring sermons.

13. *Like cold snow in the time of harvest, so is a faithful messenger to his senders; for he makes return to his master's soul.* Scholars tell us this isn't snow falling during harvest, something both disastrous and highly unlikely. Rather, it refers to a servant hustling down from the mountains a vessel of refreshing clean snow for everyone who is working so hard. Western culture would emphasize the thrill of being a recipient of this pleasure, but Hebrew culture points out what a blessing it is to receive back the gratitude of those who were blessed.

14. *A man boasting himself in a false gift is like clouds and wind, but no rain.* Contrasted against the previous parable, this image helps us understand the whole picture. What use is someone who makes all these warming promises and never delivers? It's better to go unnoticed than to be remembered for something like that.

15. *In being slow to anger a ruler is won over, and a soft tongue breaks the bone.* Most Eastern potentates would engage in testing those who entered their presence; it was protocol in some contexts. Witness how Joseph handled his brothers when they visited Egypt during his time as viceroy (Genesis 42); Joseph's behavior was entirely typical. Someone who handled pressure well was a candidate for promotion to court service. Even if you had no such ambition, having any hope of influence starts with acting noble, not like some entitled, spoiled brat. It was not a matter of steel will in denying your emotions, but a moral refinement of knowing when it was proper to show them.

16. *Have you found honey? Eat only as much as is enough for you, lest you be filled with it and vomit it.* Stumbling across a hive with honey was common enough in ancient Palestine. If you lacked the time and patience to get more than a taste, that was sweet enough. If you manage to harvest the whole thing, can you keep in mind that this is a blessing from God meant to be shared? You should already have a fair idea how much is appropriate to eat at one time; that's a critical part of gratitude to God for His blessings. Those without restraint will end up harming themselves and wasting the stuff in an attempt to Hoover up the whole thing.

17. *Withdraw your foot from your neighbor's house, lest he be weary of you and hate you.* This is the same as the previous verse, warning about being so wrapped up in yourself that you lack

empathy. It's not the Greek's philosophy of moderation in all things, but the Eastern sensing with your heart what is morally appropriate in the context. A real man of God always leaves his audience wishing for more because he gives more than he takes but is humble enough to imagine that he always received more than he gave.

18. *A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is a maul, and a sword, and a sharp arrow.* This rests fully upon the image of *shalom* as the broader moral justice of seeking social stability. How long can you live in a community where you keep stirring up trouble? All the more so is this critical when most of your neighbors are kinfolks, as it would be in the Ancient Near East.

19. *Trust in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint.* Again, this is a close corollary of the previous parable. Civil existence requires trust. The word "unfaithful" here is based on the idea of sneaky and covert. Everyday life around sneaky people seriously hinders normal social stability.

20. *As he who takes away a garment in cold weather, as vinegar upon niter, so is he who sings songs to a heavy heart.* This is a much more obvious warning about being self-absorbed. We've all dealt with people who cannot possibly imagine that folks around them might not feel the same about a given situation. Whatever it is they feel is mandatory for others, which strips away the humanity of everyone else. How about a little empathy?

21-22. *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you shall heap coals of fire upon his head, and the LORD shall reward you.* Paul quotes this directly in Romans 12:20 and the meaning is obvious to most people. Jesus referred to it in His Sermon on the Mount in opposition to the false Jewish teaching of His day (Matthew 5:43-48). Your response to hatred must meet the test of moral necessity instead of nursing your bruised ego.

23. *The north wind drives away rain; so does an angry face a backbiting tongue.* The text here is ambiguous and the translation disputed. Our source probably gets it backward. The big issue is not whence rainy weather comes, but the relationship between social habits. Backbiting is an ancient concept of going around behind someone's back and disparaging them to others out of spite over some imagined offense. It's petty social politicking. An angry countenance is a figure of speech for being out of someone's favor. Thus, as easily as you can predict storms from the wind's direction, you can predict that backbiting will get you in trouble with the powerful.

24. *It is better to dwell in the corner of the housetop than with a quarreling woman and to share a house.* This is a repeat of previous proverbs, but in this context it takes on a new meaning that one should avoid political marriages. Take a consistent stand for divine moral justice and don't jockey for influence by declaring alliances of convenience. Be willing to pay the price for embracing God's character in a sinful world.

25. *Like cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.* In context, the second phrase refers to report of a successful trade mission, or perhaps that some enemy is too busy with trouble elsewhere to bother you. There is a substantial sense of risk; this is no frivolous report of curiosities. Thus, a good messenger will push to the limits of human endurance to deliver such news.

26. *A righteous man falling down before the wicked is like a troubled fountain and a rotten spring.* Without a short course on the hydrology of Ancient Palestine, we simply note water was exceedingly precious and blocking access to others was unthinkable. Most springs were a leak through rock from some underground aquifer that rose periodically to overflow; the majority of natural springs were seasonal. People would dig back into the hillside to tap the aquifer lower in the water table for a more consistent supply. That meant also constructing a reservoir closer to the surface, but still protected inside a cave when possible. The terminology suggests a reservoir that was exposed and fouled by trampling, or the cave collapsed and made it inaccessible. Righteous men are few enough as it is; humbling them to serve the wicked represents a threat to life for everyone else.

27. *It is not good to eat much honey; so for men to search their own glory is not glory.* Here we have a more obvious restatement of verse 16 above. Glory is a by-product of something else. In moral terms, glory is properly reflected onto you from others, from God in particular.

28. *He who has no rule over his own spirit is like a broken down city without a wall.* The translation here suffers from English idioms. In Hebrew, first comes the image of a city deeply ashamed by the punishing hand of some greater military power pulling down their wall, rather like the humiliation of publicly stripping someone naked in ANE times. It proclaimed the victim a common harlot open to any man's abuse, utterly unworthy and incapable of self-protection, and by implication unworthy of common human regard. This follows the comparative image of a nobleman who has no sense of self-restraint.

Proverbs 26

The advice to nobility continues, with an emphasis to watch out for certain kinds of people. We remind ourselves that "fool" and "folly" refer to a failure to subject the mind to the supremacy of the heart. Thus, it is more about the lack of moral discernment as the cause for acting silly.

1. *As snow in summer, and as rain in harvest, so honor is not becoming for a fool.* The cited weather conditions are completely out of place in Palestine, as is treating a fool as a substantial member of society.

2. *As the bird by wandering, as the swallow by flying, so the curse without cause shall not come.* This is not the best translation. The first is more like a sparrow flitting about, the second a swallow that darts back and forth and never seems to perch anywhere. Thus, a curse uttered contrary to God's moral character will never alight.

3. *A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back.* In the minds of ancient Hebrew people, you wouldn't ride a horse without whip to urge them when they tired, and you certainly couldn't maintain control over an onager without a bit and bridle. The rod was both symbol of authority and punitive implement. The obvious point is that you can train but cannot educate a fool. Some people demand law because they refuse to understand grace.

4-5. *Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his foolishness, so that he may not be wise in his own eyes.* This is not a self-contradiction if you catch the second part of each statement for context. Hebrew figures of speech could be

ambiguous, same as in most other languages. Thus, don't take a fool seriously or he'll draw you into his folly. Rather, answer in such a way that you make it clear you think he's a fool.

6-9. *He who sends a message by the hand of a fool cuts off the feet and drinks down damage. The legs of the lame are not equal; so is a parable in the mouth of fools. As he who binds a stone in a sling, so is he who gives honor to a fool. As a thorn goes up into the hand of a drunkard, so is a parable in the mouth of fools.* We can never be completely rid of fools, so they do have their place in this world. These are examples where they don't fit. Trying to use a fool as messenger is like cutting off your feet or drinking poison. Even if you teach a fool the meaning of a parable, they'll use it wrong. Taking a fool seriously is about as smart as stitching a stone into the pocket of a sling. And just how well can a drunk pull out a thorn? Don't empower a smart-aleck.

10. *Great is the Former of all, but he who hires a fool is like one who hires one passing by.* The Hebrew is ambiguous and translations vary. It seems the common essence is that a fool is the threat you must learn to recognize; treat him with the same care and suspicion you would some random foreigner.

11-12. *As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to his folly. Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.* The only dogs a Hebrew encountered were dangerous sly predators, so we have a large cultural gap here. Yet even Westerners are repulsed by this behavior in dogs, and science has no good answer as to why they do it, beyond the mere fact dogs just don't care. They'll eat anything and this is the point of the Hebrew reference. Thus, a fool learns nothing from bad experiences, and should be as repulsive as dogs were to ancient Hebrews. Bad as that may be, a conceited man is even worse.

13-15. *The lazy one says, "There is a lion in the way; a lion is in the streets." As the door turns upon its hinges, so does the lazy man turn upon his bed. The lazy man hides his hand in his bosom; it grieves him to bring it again to his mouth.* While we've seen these before, the context of advice for nobility adds a new dimension. Don't pamper even your own kin; provide for them according to their willingness to get their hands dirty with the work of the household.

16. *The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can give a reason.* Some people are simply efficient, having paid attention and thought about what they do. Best of all, they can tell you when inaction pays off. Lazy people can only offer lame excuses as if they were the wisdom of seven wise men combined.

17. *He who passes by enraging himself over strife not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears.* When you run upon a conflict in progress, you aren't likely to have a clue which side is just. Jumping in on either side will almost surely get you hurt. It's best to cultivate revulsion for public disputes.

18-19. *Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, so is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, "Am I not joking?"* The risk to life from the first is comparable with the risk to social stability (*shalom*) with the latter. Pranking people who trust you is morally the same as violence. This refers to people who would play head games for their personal amusement, not at all the same thing as a sheikh testing people under his authority.

20-22. *Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, the fighting ceases. As coals to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man to kindle fighting. The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.* The rich imagery here translates poorly. A talebearer is someone who keeps pushing something until it starts to come apart. The word translated “quarrelsome” is a general term for stirring up trouble. We’ve all met people with souls so empty that their only source of entertainment is manipulating others into fighting. It doesn’t matter what excuse they claim to justify this, you can tell by the results that they are a threat to *shalom*. It’s not a bad idea to run off such folk because the wounds can be long term.

23-26. *Burning lips and a wicked heart are like a broken piece of pottery with silver waste. He who hates pretends with his lips and stores up deceit within him. When he makes his voice gracious, do not believe him; for seven hateful things are in his heart. He whose hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness shall be shown before the congregation.* It’s easy to miss the point of the pottery image. A potshard, while useful in some few cases, like skimming dross off of molten silver, is still just a chunk from a shattered vessel. It might be interesting to look at with the shiny coating, but it has no value. In other words, it’s just junk coated with pretty junk, the same as someone with a talent for persuasion hiding a predatory soul. Expose such a fraud.

27. *Whoever digs a pit shall fall into it; and he who rolls a stone, it will return on him.* The translation misses a figure of speech. More than a pit, it’s a trap. And it’s not just any stone, but one big enough for building. Those who use traps will eventually get caught in their own deceptions. People who try to destabilize social structure will be crushed when it collapses.

28. *A lying tongue hates those afflicted by it, and a flattering mouth works ruin.* The subtle point here is that there is no difference between flattery and outright lies. This is a warning to those with a needy ego that there is always someone willing to butter you up to destroy you.

Proverbs 27

Only a fool takes himself too seriously. Your personal sense of identity and integrity should not rest on total control of outcomes. Self-cynicism is not the same as self-doubt; with the former you can still forge ahead in your calling while keeping a firm grip on penitence. God’s grant of dominion in this life does not mean that the only people who care about you are those who submit to your fantasies. Your best friends will have their own sense of dominion. In many ways, the substance of the Fall was elevating our own individual reasoning power, our sense of order and what *ought to be*, to the place in our souls God made for Himself. A critical part of redemption is making room for God to speak through external sources, including other people, and learning to accept a context we don’t control.

Western minds struggle to grasp how an Eastern ruler would trust his nobles to handle things without a lot of detailed instructions. Nobles were considered adept at knowing the heart of the ruler, and talented at producing results that boosted his reputation, in part because they did not struggle with selfish ambition but were held by a sense of calling to the welfare of the whole community. What follows are not direct quotes, but restatements of the ancient Eastern noble morals.

1. *Do not boast yourself of tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.* This is the quintessential statement of trusting in God, who alone can see the future. You can assert only what you intend to do for now and would look quite the fool if you insist on a course of action that does not allow for surprises.

2. *Let another man praise you, and not your mouth; a stranger, and not your lips.* This is actually the other half of the previous verse. The Hebrew word for “praise” is the same as “boast.” What you think about yourself may not mean much to others. Wielding power is inherently political, meaning that you should never pretend to control the narrative finally told. Don’t worry about your reputation among humans; worry about your faithfulness to God’s call.

3-4. *A stone is heavy, and sand is heavy; but a fool’s wrath is heavier than them both. Wrath is cruel, and anger is overwhelming; but who is able to stand before envy?* Exercising authority is actually work. Sometimes you deal with people dumb as rocks, wholly unable to think for themselves. Even harder to deal with is someone who gets insulted at the smallest thing. But as bad as that may be, the worst is someone who cannot comprehend why you reward people as individuals. They feel insulted, as if you excluded them from spite, and will nag you to death and waste more time and resources than all the rest of your domain.

5-6. *Open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.* The image here translates poorly into English. We all want to be loved and appreciated. The image of someone hiding their affection equates to staying out of your way. Contrast that with a friend who stops you when you are about to make a fool of yourself. At what cost do they protect us from some greater harm? False adulation is not really love, so avoid giving any place to a yes-man.

7. *The full soul despises a honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.* Another gem tarnished in translation, this is more than a warning against surrendering to your appetites and trying to take your fill of things. This has nothing to do with the Western image of iron discipline and fake self-denial, nor some kind of golden moderation. Rather, you should work from the assumption that you cannot trust yourself to estimate how much of anything is enough and expect that some part of you will always want more than you get. Don’t ignore the needs of the body, but try to cultivate a desire for moral truth, where even the harshest realities can still seem a blessing.

8. *As a bird that wanders from her nest, so is a man who wanders from his place.* The image of the bird is hopping and flitting aimlessly with no particular purpose, by degrees wandering too far from responsibilities. This compares favorably with a man who doesn’t keep his attention on his mission from God. His “place” is the domain God granted him through circumstances the man does not control.

9-10. *Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart; so does the sweetness of one’s friend by advice from the heart. Your own friend, and your father’s friend, do not forsake them; nor go to your brother’s house in the day of your trouble; better is a neighbor that is near than a brother far off.* There’s nothing wrong with trusting the loyalty of your blood kin. The context here assumes typical arrangements among nobles who disperse their sons to reduce natural rivalries. The truest counsel comes

from someone with no ambition to rule, but is driven to support those who do, and is already deeply involved in the local situation.

11. *My son, be wise, and make my heart glad, so that I may answer him who shames me.* The Hebrew word translated “shame” here is the image of stripping away vestments and armor to show the naked and vulnerable human under it all. This isn’t merely a periodic reminder inserted in the text a father writes for his sons, begging that they not make a fool of him. Rather, it reflects fundamental morality itself. It’s not a question of pampering the rulers, but independently seeking their best interest within your calling from God. Cover the human failures of your rulers with your own pursuit of holiness.

12-13. *A sensible one foresees the evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished. Take his robe that is surety for a stranger, and take a pledge from him for a strange woman.* This is a general reminder that choices are usually packaged with consequences. Therefore, as someone who exercises authority, it’s proper moral justice to let others suffer for folly. In Hebrew society, the ultimate expression of folly is binding your fortunes to people you don’t even know, aside from their seductive sales pitch.

14. *He who blesses his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it shall be counted a curse to him.* The cultural image of rising early in the morning expresses eagerness, excessive in this case. It feels like a curse to deal with airheads whose affection arises from having no identity of their own.

15-16. *A never-ending dropping in a very rainy day and a quarrelsome woman are alike. Whoever hides her hides the wind, and his right hand encounters slippery oil.* We will see a lot about good women later in this study, but we should be surprised how little Solomon says of bad ones. The quintessence of feminine moral failure is a woman who forgets that she is on the same team as her man. Thus, she disputes with him almost every decision he makes. How can a man provide moral covering to a woman whose presence is like the worst storms? It’s like trying to pick up oil with your hands: Not only is failure guaranteed, but you can’t hang on to anything else afterward.

17. *Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the face of his friend.* Rubbing two pieces of iron together does no real damage but gives both a useful edge. Your best friends are those who remain firm in their convictions regardless of the sparks it might cause.

18. *Whoever keeps the fig tree shall eat its fruit; so he who waits on his master shall be honored.* Another of those Eastern feudal concepts is allowing a servant to share in the blessings of his hard work. It motivates him to do a better job. The best way to boost your own reputation is honoring your servants publicly.

19. *As in water face answers to face, so the heart of man answers to man.* This translation is a little archaic. You can see a good reflection of your face in a pool of water. Just so, you can discern the morals of someone else in how they express their commitments.

20. *Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.* Death is never satisfied, and our fallen nature is always willing to see the next bit of visual stimulation. Our fallen nature offers no good filter for things we might see, yet it gives us nightmares and destroys our morals.

21. *As the refining pot for silver and the furnace for gold, so is a man to his praise.* To see how much actual precious metal there is in ore, we heat it to separate out the dross. The true test of a man's moral character is how he reacts to praise. If it changes how he acts, there's still room for improvement.

22. *Though you should pound a fool in a bowl with a bar in the midst of wheat, his foolishness will not depart from him.* The image is more of a large mortar and pestle, a primitive means of grinding grain still used for small amounts in Solomon's time. Flour is still wheat, but it's easier to work with, unlike fools for whom no amount of effort makes any difference.

23-27. *Know well the face of your flocks; set your heart on your herds. For riches are not forever; nor the crown from generation to generation? When the hay is removed, and the tender grass is seen, and mountain-plants are gathered, the lambs are for your clothing, and the goats are the price of the field. And you shall have goats' milk enough for your food, for the food of your household, and a living for your young women.* A marvelous paradox, this is a parable that warns against forgetting the source of symbols in parabolic language. If a king is shepherd to his subjects, let him learn literally how to herd domestic animals, lest he fail to understand God's calling on him. A real shepherd comes to genuine compassion for his flock. Do you understand that, when hay is cut down, the roots sprout a fresh crop? Are you aware that life can be sustained without all the trappings of royal regalia? Don't be a slave captive to your position; distinguish yourself by moral discernment about the genuine redemptive needs of humanity.

Proverbs 28

What you believe you experience is just shadow; ultimate reality is the moral truth behind it all. This chapter is full of short epigrams all getting at the same basic idea. They are not doctrinaire assertions of wishful thinking that we know aren't always the way it turns out. Rather, they are assertions of moral truth teaching men of power how things *should* turn out under their reign. This collection warns the rulers: Let these things characterize your rule. See with the heart, not with the senses, and know the truth of God's character.

1. *The wicked flee when no man pursues; but the righteous are bold as a lion.* This is more than a mere matter of clear conscience, though it includes that. Rather, those who know what God intended are willing to suffer when the whole world perverts His intent because they are driven by His Spirit. What can threaten a lion? Whatever threat we face from human perversion is simply not important.

2. *Because of the transgression of a land, many are its rulers; but it is prolonged by a man of discernment who knows right.* This is subtle and speaks on different levels. On the one hand, God has a tendency to provoke a frequent turnover on the throne of an evil nation. By the same token, an evil society surrenders itself to all kinds of petty masters and demonic forces. But the main point is for the ruler in training to realize that his best hope for a long and prosperous reign from God's hand is to be morally discerning and never stop learning.

3. *A poor man who crushes the poor is like a sweeping rain which leaves no food.* A sense of moral wealth changes your attitude. Will you rule like a poor man, someone who is never satisfied?

The second word for “poor” here is a different term meaning “dependent.” A greedy king is like a torrential downpour, not just knocking down the crops in the field, but washing away the seed for future crops. It’s too easy to forget that your greatest asset is your people.

4. *Those who forsake the law praise the wicked; but those who keep the law plead against them.* In moral terms, this echoes the previous verse. If you stop paying attention to the Covenant Law, you will end up promoting some awful people because, in your lust for power, you can’t recognize moral depravity. A king who takes the Covenant seriously will tend to push back against folks who try to manipulate the throne.

5. *Evil men do not understand judgment; but those who seek the LORD understand all things.* One of the oldest forms of manipulation is appealing to concrete results based on mere human logic. These worldly-wise folks could be found even in the most mystical of cultures. You shall know them by their fruits. If you sincerely desire Jehovah’s favor, you will tend to see all things in terms of His divine justice. It makes it easy to spot evil men because they will emphasize some imaginary professional expertise.

6. *Better is the poor who walks in his uprightness than he who is perverse in his ways, though he is rich.* Don’t be fooled by apparent material wealth. If it requires perversion to be rich, then you can’t afford to be wealthy. Be a blessing to those who prefer moral purity at whatever material cost.

7. *Whoever keeps the law is a wise son, but a companion of gluttons shames his father.* Not the best translation, this proverb refers to establishing an early track record of high morals, contrary to the worldly wisdom of “sowing your wild oats.” We might better translate “gluttons” as “riotous fellows.” Hanging out with them is a good way to be passed over as heir to the throne. Passing note: In Hebrew the term “wise son” sounds like “bean bane” when spoken, the kind of thing that becomes a common expression.

8. *He who increases his wealth by interest and unjust gain, he shall gather it for him who will pity the poor.* The word for “interest” here is usury, illegal under Moses. Your fellow Israelis are family. It’s the image of someone amassing a large estate with the excuse of passing it to his direct heirs, but he does it by preying on his other relatives. This kind of thing was all too common, despite being a scandalous violation of ancient tribal custom. A just king will encourage a proper distribution of wealth across a man’s extended family, the stated reason why God blesses some with wealth.

9. *He who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is a hateful thing.* This is echoed all over the prophetic record. It’s the image of someone who can’t be bothered to even get to know his sovereign lord but has the nerve to make requests contrary to stated policy. Insulting among humans, it is blasphemous in dealing with God.

10. *Whoever causes the righteous man to go astray in an evil way, he himself shall fall into his own pit; but the upright shall inherit good.* This points directly at the ruler. The image is one of taking advantage of honest men who trust you. Do you think you are so slick? In the long run, you will be caught in your own trap. At the very least you will look like a complete ass while your victims will gain sympathy.

11. *The rich man is wise in his own eyes; but the poor who has understanding searches him out.* This is the essence of moral failure. Materialism was a significant problem even in ancient mystical cultures. If all you care about is your personal hedonistic comforts, then you won't even notice when someone can see right through you. They live in two entirely different worlds.

12. *When the righteous rejoice, there is great glory; but when the wicked rise, a man is hidden.* This one is subtle: A king is discerned by how his righteous subjects act. If the men who walk proud and talk loud about how great is their nation are also the good guys, then your reign is probably just. If the good guys try to stay below the radar, you are a bad king. Look around, King, and see what you have wrought.

13. *He who covers his sins shall not be blessed; but whoever confesses and leaves them shall have mercy.* The people worth your time don't expect perfection; they'll give you room to make mistakes. Repay their mercy by your honesty and sincerity, and work to improve. Arrogance will darken your reign.

14. *Blessed is the man dreading God, but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief.* This is a close correlation to the previous verse. Humility before God wins His favor. Losing that favor is begging for trouble, because it blinds you to the pure moral vision of your heart.

15. *Like a roaring lion and a ranging bear, so is a wicked ruler over the helpless people.* The animals are depicted in their predatory hunger. From our Western mythology this isn't much discouragement from evil. In Hebrew culture, the predator was a bad guy, and the shepherd was the essence of manhood. A good shepherd would handle lions and bears and keep them from the flock.

16. *A ruler lacking understanding even adds oppressions; he who hates unjust gain shall prolong his days.* This echoes the previous verse. It's the image of a balance beam: Light on moral wisdom means heavy on oppression. By contrast, someone who has no use for plunder but prefers social stability is the kind of king who draws fearsome support from his people.

17-18. *A man who is pressed down with the blood of a soul shall flee to the pit; do not let them uphold him. Whoever walks uprightly shall be saved; but he who is perverse in his ways shall fall at once.* The imagery suffers in translation here. The Hebrew language is a little ambiguous, but it begins with the picture of someone who rushes through life seizing what they want without a moment's consideration of what is good and morally just. They tend to violence along the way as they slide quickly into the moral swamps. There's little you can do for such people so let them go. Contrast this with someone who keeps their feet on the solid paths. He has little in common with the guy who prefers frolicking around sinkholes.

19-20. *He who tills his land shall have plenty of bread, but he pursuing vanities shall have poverty enough. A faithful man shall overflow with blessings, but he who makes haste to be rich shall not be innocent.* The fundamental image is a feudal grant. If you stick with what God has placed in your hands, He will prosper you. Don't envy what God gives others. Chasing your hedonistic fantasies will be "sated" with sorrow. What will you feed your household? What will your children inherit from you?

21-22. *To have respect of persons is not good; yea, for a piece of bread a man will transgress. He who hastens to be rich has an evil eye, and does not know that poverty will come upon him.* It's an ancient figure of speech to be a sucker for pretense and appearances. Will you be a king cheaply bribed to save someone's fake reputation? It's not that such kings are blind, but that they see the world through a perverted lens ("evil eye"). He knows the value of nothing.

23. *He who rebukes a man shall afterwards find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue.* The word translated here as "rebuke" means specifically to stand up for what is just and right. Even if such defense of moral truth comes sharply spoken, it's easier to accept that compared to the sorrows of flattering words that lead you astray.

24. *Whoever robs his father or his mother and says, "It is no sin," he shall be a companion to a destroyer.* As always, the context is a tribal society; all your neighbors are likely to be relatives. One would politely call any community elder "father" or "mother." The word for "rob" is not that specific; the Hebrew term implies snatching or plucking in any sense. Thus, it's the image of someone who thinks it's just a game to prey on older people in their own clan. It doesn't matter if what you take doesn't seem like much; it makes you an ally of anything that threatens social stability. Righteous kings won't tolerate that kind of thing.

25-26. *He who is of a proud heart stirs up fighting; but he who puts his trust in the LORD shall be made fat. He who trusts in his own heart is a fool; but whoever walks wisely, he shall be delivered.* Translation loses the play on words here. The Hebrew image is a "fat heart" – someone committed to serving his own pride. Trusting in the lord conjures the image of humility, a "hungry heart" committed to penitence before the Lord. The penitent will have a fat soul, instead, well fed on God's truth. The second sentence merely restates it in different words but uses a figure of speech that we easily miss: Trusting in one's own heart is equivalent to making yourself your own god. As always, hearts can be darkened. They are filled with truth only when the Spirit of the Lord is present.

27. *He who gives to the poor shall not lack, but he who hides his eyes shall have many a curse.* This is not a question of giving what someone asks or yielding to scolding demands made by professional charity operators. This is a matter of a king who is blind to human need. Even if the Law of Moses protects the king from being cursed by the people, refusing to acknowledge the suffering of those you rule will bring God's disfavor.

28. *When the wicked rise, a man hides himself, but when they perish, the righteous increase.* This repeats verse 12 above, but in a slightly different context referring to the peasants. Who will weep, and who will rejoice, when you die, King?

Proverbs 29

This chapter is a collection of shorter and simpler proverbs, the kind of thing you might hear among the peasants. It's as if Solomon asks his sons to consider: What will the common man think of you? What sort of proverbs will they say out there in the streets, the roads between little villages and in the fields of labor? What will it be like at the bottom of the political ladder during your reign?

1. *A man who hardens his neck when reprov'd shall be suddenly broken, and there will be no healing.* A more literal rendering refers to “a man of reproofs” – someone whose life is characterized by receiving frequent correction from those in authority. If he allows calluses to build up on the back of his neck so that he is indifferent to such education, at some point will come a strike that breaks his neck. Wise kings don’t ignore the little people, lest they suddenly realize they stand alone against whatever God allows to rise against them.

2-3. *When the righteous increase, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people mourn. Whoever loves wisdom rejoices his father; but a companion of harlots wastes wealth.* Were a king to go among his subjects in disguise, would he see people generally relaxed and pleasant, or will he find them deep sorrow at the heavy burden of his reign? The second sentence uses very much the same wording; brighten the people and you’ll brighten your father’s countenance. The Hebrew figure of speech comes out more like “shepherd to harlots” as the image of fat and sassy women who always get what they want. Such is not the image of a righteous royal court. God grants wealth so you can rise in reputation when you share it with your family, not your cronies.

4. *The king establishes the land by judgment; but he taking bribes tears it down.* A king can make or break his own domain. The literal image of a just king’s domain is “standing strong.” The opposite is “beating it down.” What a king does in private affects his entire realm of authority.

5. *A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.* The image is subtle and hard to translate here. Flattery derives from the image of someone noisily running ahead to remove all the least impediments so that the other never sees so much as a grain of sand changing the elevation of the bottoms of his shoes. In its place, he spreads a net to trap the man in a false sense of dependence. This applies to kings even more.

6. *In the sin of an evil man there is a snare; but the righteous sings and rejoices.* Again, the richness of the imagery is lost in translation. If a king tolerates rebellion, he gains the punishment of the rebel for himself. So, in the minds of the common people, those who rebel against moral justice should hang, choking noisily. But those who seek moral purity should be singing and dancing.

7. *The righteous knows the plea of the poor; the wicked cares not to know it.* Most English translations partly miss the point here. The focus is on the word “know” – the just heart guides the mind to a full grasp of reality. They give an honest hearing to a suit filed by those with no money or power because moral justice is its own reward. The righteous judge wants to be a part of that. The immoral judge has no concept for any of this, only his own personal comfort. He won’t even permit the poor to bring a claim into his court.

8. *Scornful men bring a city into a snare, but the wise turn away wrath.* Another bad translation: This proverb begins with a term that means scornful, but it’s also an old pun about someone trying to inflate their reputation pretending to translate a foreign tongue. They miss the whole point of the conversation. It’s a derisive term for self-important big-shot ambassadors. Letting such people have authority will kindle a fire (“puff” is the Hebrew word, not snare) on the nation as symbolized by the image of a capital city. The word for “wise” here is someone who knows when to keep his mouth shut because he lacks that inflated ego. Instead, he seeks a way to defuse tension from behind the scenes.

9. *If a wise man contends with a foolish man, whether he rages or laughs, there is no rest.* A better translation: A wise king will have no peace in his court if he has to put up with the constant intrusions of someone lacking moral discernment. Every hour it's either raging fury or uproarious mocking. The image of a fool is someone utterly foreign to contemplation and facing his own humanity; he's always grousing about or making fun of others and insists that the most powerful person present hears him out.

10. *Men of blood hate the upright; but the just seek his soul.* Bloodthirsty people are maniacally driven to prey on the man of good character; they'd kill him on sight. But the morally just folks will do their best to emulate that man, driven to spend time with him.

11. *A fool speaks all his mind; but a wise one keeps it in until afterwards.* This is a blunt statement echoed often in the background of ancient wisdom literature as a whole. Even in our time, we recognize civility as the tendency of not blasting out every thought that crosses your mind. The image here is someone who has no sense of social stability because they are too self-absorbed.

12. *If a ruler listens to lies, all his servants are wicked.* A king is known by his counselors. If they don't hasten to correct false information, what kind of king must he be to have them around?

13. *The poor and the deceitful man meet together; the LORD gives light to the eyes of both.* This requires a little context. Being poor doesn't mean you are stupid. Being a predator (typically a loan shark) doesn't mean you don't know what is evil. The two encounter each other in the business of daily life and recognize each other for what they are, despite a great difference in what they make of it. Sometimes we don't get to see how things turn out in the end, but God gives everyone an opportunity to choose His ways and reject the deception of how things seem to be from a mere materialistic perspective.

14. *A king who truly judges the weak, his throne shall be established forever.* Clumsy translation: A king who exercises strong moral judgment with those who are weak will stand in God's favor. Never mind what God plans in terms of earthly events, such a king will be blessed within the context.

15. *The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a boy sent off causes shame to his mother.* This is the image of a mother who can't be bothered to actually be a mother, helping to form the character of her children. When the son gets out of hand at home, instead of taking the time to discern the moral issue and correcting the child's false ideas, she just runs them out of the house for the sake of her own convenience. Only by a miracle would such a child grow up to care about others; all the more so if he is king.

16. *When the wicked are multiplied, sin increases; but the righteous shall see their fall.* Mistranslation here: When the wicked are elevated in power, a general level of moral decline sets in. Eventually this will run its course and their predations will rot the system from the inside. Maybe not within a single lifetime, but those with a high moral character will recognize why a government collapses. Morality is reality.

17. *Correct your son, and he shall give you rest; yea, he shall give delight to your soul.* Why does Solomon invest so much effort in these books he writes? It's because he wants to die seeing his kingdom a happy place and his sons worthy of celebration. As they take up the tasks of running

the kingdom, they must understand the moral truth of how things work, and that giving the people a life worth living is their whole mission.

18. *Where there is no wisdom, the people perish; but he who keeps the law, he is blessed.* The KJV is a bad translation of this and has been quoted abusively in English speaking religion. The word for “wisdom” means insight, a clear moral understanding of what God says about the world He created. Without out that, you might as well slaughter the common folk with your own hands. But investing resources and time into making the Covenant everyone’s “common sense” will stand you in God’s favor.

19. *A servant will not be corrected by words, for though he understands, he will not answer.* Most people in the East became slaves while pursuing other plans. You should hardly be surprised when they aren’t eager to please. They might know what you want but feel disinclined to respond appropriately. This is why slave owners are prepared to use physical force. However, the contextual implication is the image of a king who does not want to serve the moral truth of God. What should he expect his kingdom will do if he is unresponsive to their real needs?

20. *Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.* Again, we return to that quintessential image of a wise man: He waits until his moral authority gains him a hearing. Sure, some few have minds like a steel trap, but they usually get there from long patient study. The image of “hasty” is an impetuous child crowding you and demanding your attention without any regard for anyone else. In an adult, this isn’t mere folly; this is a serious threat to life and limb, and you rightly treat them with defensive violence.

21. *He pampering his servant from youth, that one in his after days shall his successor.* There are better English translations, but the ambiguity is in the Hebrew thinking. It hardly matters what someone’s legal status is; if you treat them as family, they are family. That could be good or bad, so be cautious whom you welcome into your inheritance. Consider the end of every matter as best you can and act accordingly from the start.

22. *An angry man stirs up fighting, and a furious man abounds in sin.* Talent means little if moral character is lacking. When kings consider whom to commission as servants, they should avoid the genius who grates on everyone’s nerves.

23. *A man’s pride shall bring him low; but honor shall uphold the humble in spirit.* The contrast here in Hebrew imagery is rich. On the one hand is a man with an inflated ego; he’s up there where he could fall at any moment. The other is someone who isn’t full of hot air, but is substantial, and he stays close to the ground in the first place. Massive cornerstones that keep buildings from falling down a slope aren’t known for drifting off into every gust of wind.

24. *He who shares with a thief hates his own soul; he hears an oath and does not tell.* This translation misses the point. The first part is clear enough about being a partner with someone who takes what isn’t his. The second part is not about keeping promises, but about hiding curses. If you become aware of a conspiracy of evil, you are part of the evil if you don’t report it to the affected parties. It matters not whether you can do anything about it, but that you are obliged to turn on the lights so everyone can see.

25-26. *The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever puts his trust in the LORD shall be safe. Many seek the ruler's favor; but each man's judgment comes from the LORD.* Anxiety over what men can do to you is a trap. Trust in God and embrace His revelation at whatever cost, because after men have done all they can, you still have to face the Creator. It makes no difference if the man is a king.

27. *An unjust man is a hateful thing to the just; and he who is upright in the way is hateful to the wicked.* Nothing does more for a king's reputation than making the right enemies.

Part 3

Chapters 30-31: Collected material from other authors.

Proverbs 30

This chapter has provoked a lot of debate because of serious variations between different manuscripts, though mostly in the introductory portion. While our translation here (Green's Modern King James) adheres to common traditions, it's not hard to find other translations that take a different approach. And frankly, an ancient Hebrew scholar would consider most of that debate downright silly. Where Solomon got this material is not important, nor even if it was added by later editors. It would seem obvious that it represents non-Hebrew thinking, perhaps more Arabic in the sense of Abraham's other sons. Even if the thoughts come from outright pagan sources, as other material in this book surely does, it shouldn't be too difficult to see how the wisdom reflects Solomon's habit of finding God's truth everywhere because he operated above the mere intellectual legalistic nit-picking more common of the Post-Hellenist rabbis of Jesus' day.

We note that the author of this material is fond of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) structures not common in Hebrew literature. There is heavy use of the three and then four, which is meant to portray completeness in moral terms.

1-3. *The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the prophecy: The man spoke to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal, saying, Surely I am more like an animal than any man, and do not have the understanding of a man. I have not learned wisdom, nor the knowledge of the holy.* These names are meaningless to us as presented and may well be something else badly garbled in transmission. Whoever he is, the man confesses that he is brutish, using a term for someone's calloused foot or cow's hoof. It's the simple wisdom of humility.

4-6. *Who has gone up to Heaven and has come down? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in His garments? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name? Surely you know. Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He reprove you and you be found a liar.* By implication our speaker asserts that true wisdom is only from God, by asking who it is capable of crossing the boundaries between earth and the Spirit Realm, capable of handling Creation like a toy. Rather as a joke he suggests that it shouldn't be hard to discover the fame of any man who did such a thing, if only because any family or tribe that descended from him would still be telling

his legends. Of course, we are talking about God Himself, whose revelation is pure in the sense of gold refined by fire. That is, it has been tested and found reliable. Don't put words in His mouth, as it were, because that is blasphemy. Our reasoning is hardly on His level. We have all we can do just obeying things He did say.

7-9. *I have asked two things from You; do not deny them before I die; remove far from me vanity and a lying word; give me neither poverty or riches; tear for me my portion of bread, lest I be full and deceive, and say, "Who is the LORD?" Or lest I be poor, and steal, and violate the name of my God.* Agur says he has been consistent in two simple requests and implies that he has yet to see them carried out – Don't wait until I die to do these two things. Each item is a pair in itself. First, he wants people to stop trying to deceive him. He uses two terms that don't easily translate into English. The word for "vanity" is the concept of good things destroyed and made useless; "lie" is from two words meaning a thing expressed or spoken but meant to deceive. It's a common ANE literary device to ask one thing that everyone desires and knows you'll never get, and then asking for something just possible. The second request is more doable: a reasonable level of prosperity. This is more precisely asking a fair share of the family's resources. He uses the image of the flat bread eaten in that part of the world, similar to pita. Don't give him the whole thing but tear it in half. By the same token, don't deprive him of a fair share from the common resources, lest he feel compelled to steal just to survive.

10-14. *Do not accuse a servant to his master, lest he curse you, and you be found guilty. There is a generation that curses their father, and does not bless their mother. There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their own filth. There is a generation, O how lofty are their eyes! And their eyelids are lifted up. There is a generation whose teeth are like swords, and their jaw teeth like knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, and the needy from among men.* It's easy to get lost in the images here and miss the whole point. He begins with the portrayal of slandering someone like a busybody with nothing better to do than stir up trouble. The word translated "curse" offers the image of dehumanizing someone. He completes the picture by pointing to arrogance and how it eventually results in physical violence. The whole point is that if you start off acting like your desire for entertainment is more important than social stability (the symbol of ultimate moral good), it's not too many steps from there to murder.

15-17. *The leech has two daughters, crying, "Give, give!" Three things are never satisfied, yea, four things never say, "Enough!" The grave, and the barren womb, the earth not filled with water, and the fire, have not said, "Enough." The eye that mocks at his father and despises to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it.* You can almost see Agur gesturing dramatically, turning to face each fist in turn, "Gimme, gimme!" Then he goes on to portray certain mental images that symbolize what we call a bottomless pit, each unpleasant in some way. Death will consume every living thing and never be filled. A barren womb will absorb everything many men could give without producing offspring. In a semiarid land, you cannot imagine the soil being so saturated that rain runs off without eventually being absorbed somewhere else. And of course, fire only dies when everything is burned up. Each in its own way compares favorably with something a little obscure in our culture today – contempt for your own family. We have built a society that buries the consequences, so we can't imagine how

it holds such a high moral concern. Agur says that it matters not what provokes such arrogance or what hides it; the destructive nature of it is beyond measure.

18-20. *Three things are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I do not know: the way of an eagle in the air; the way of a snake on a rock; the way of a ship in the middle of the sea; and the way of a man with a maiden. Such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eats, and wipes her mouth, and says, "I have done no evil."* Don't we marvel at things we cannot do ourselves? The word "way" is repeated here as the image of something typical or natural for the thing depicted. We struggle to understand how eagles can travel their invisible roads in the sky, how a snake propels himself across a rock without feet, how a ship stays afloat on the sea, and how a lovely young lass who is still a virgin can lead a man to do her will. A man can experience it himself and still have no idea why he does what she wants. There is a subtle connection here. It's not human sexuality in itself, but the way we move so easily from one thing to another. Have you ever noticed how an adulterous woman can just wipe away the obvious evidence of her immorality and say with a straight face that she's done nothing harmful? Yet, how easily we tend to believe her story, even when the consequences come back on everyone. Do we not marvel at how easily we destroy our social stability?

21-23. *Under three things the earth quakes, and under four it is not able to bear up: for a servant when he reigns; and a fool when he is filled with food; for a hateful woman when she is married; and a servant girl that is heir to her mistress.* To avoid a lengthy explanation: A "servant" is either an enemy captive or someone without the protection of normal extended family resources. Either way, you don't expect them to be sympathetic to the society that enslaves them. Thus, a slave who suddenly gains power will be an oppressive ogre, as would be any fool who gets what he wants. A harridan usually gets married only because her family deceives the poor groom's family or because it's a political arrangement, but this is not the image of your good wife who sees herself on the same team as her husband. Finally, it takes some serious manipulation and perhaps even murder for a slave girl to legally inherit the position of her mistress. In each case, Agur portrays these things as violating the nature of reality itself.

24-28. *Four things are little on the earth, but they are exceedingly wise: the ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their food in the summer; the rock-badgers are not a mighty people, yet they make their houses in the rock; the locusts have no king, yet they go forth by bands, all of them; you can take the lizard with the hands, yet it is in king's palaces.* Wisdom is portrayed as making the most of God's provision for life; it goes without saying that wisdom precludes excessive self-interest. You can crush ants under your feet without notice, but they manage to eat year-round and survive most attacks. A rock-badger is more like a rabbit, easily startled and the prey of many other creatures, yet they have no trouble making a home among the most inaccessible places. Locusts independently manage to act in concert and records indicate they have utterly destroyed whole kingdoms economically. And common lizards aren't very big but nothing you do can keep them from infesting a king's palace. In each case, human efforts at eradication are wasted. Finding your place in God's Creation is the most empowering thing you can do.

29-31. *There are three things which go well in a march, yea, four that go well in walking: a lion is mighty among beasts and does not turn away for any; one girded in the loins; and a he-goat; and a king when his army is with him.* The figure of speech here indicates things splendid to see as they walk

confidently on their way. The lion acts like he's in charge over every other creature. The second is a little ambiguous, probably indicating something or someone trim and fleet of foot, the very opposite of lumbering and corpulent. The third is an alpha ram in the herd. The last is a figure of speech unknown in Hebrew literature and translations vary widely. However, a king who is genuinely confident in his moral position, possessed by a sense of divine calling for his mission, is the definition of regal.

32. *If you have done foolishly in lifting yourself up, or if you have thought evil, lay your hand on your mouth.* This is probably a subtle contrast to the previous proverb. The point here is: If you are going to do something morally unfitting, at least be wise enough not to boast. Given that all of nature will be against you, it's best if you proceed with serious caution and get what you can out of it without rubbing it in.

33. *Surely the churning of milk brings forth butter, and the wringing of the nose brings forth blood; so the forcing of wrath brings forth fighting.* In this triplet, the primary verbs are all the same root word meaning "to press" – churning, wringing and forcing. It's okay to do that to curdled milk, but it doesn't work too well using the same action on people.

Proverbs 31

We don't know who Lemuel was, nor should we let the question distract us. About the only useful scholarship we have on the source of this chapter tells us that it seems Aramaic in grammar and character of expression. Up until the Exile, long after Solomon's time, the common Hebrew vernacular was more Canaanite in flavor and noticeably different from the Aramaic of Abraham, not to mention the Aramized Hebrew after the Return from Exile. One gets the feeling this chapter is rather ancient even to Solomon's court. Furthermore, the format does not require, but would actually suffer from, a verse-by-verse examination.

The first section provides the context. We have a ruler named Lemuel who is lectured by his mother in ancient moral wisdom. The figure of speech she uses to open this teaching implies a rhetorical query: How will you reign? She wants him to consider what kind of man and king he will be and makes mention that she regards his birth as an answer to prayer, a prayer in which she made with customary vows to ensure he would grow up wise, among other things.

So, she encourages him to be a real man, to rule and not let himself be ruled by common human temptations. Do we fail to notice that it is a woman warning him not to let women manipulate him? She also notes that too many wealthy and powerful men fritter their lives away in alcoholism. There is a time and place for inebriation in ordinary human existence, but those times should not be many. You shouldn't act like some poor peasant who has little to live for and never gets enough booze, lest you end up one of them. Don't let human sorrow overwhelm you so that you feel tempted to use drink to medicate your misery. With power and wealth come responsibilities; ignore the obligations and you lose the privileges. God grants men power over others as a trust that they will reduce the misery of others, not waste all the effort on themselves. Exert power for justice; that's in your own best interest.

What follows this is offered in the form of a Hebrew acrostic. These are typically in more-or-less alphabetical order as each verse begins with a different letter. It still comes across with a distinct Aramaic flavor. Whether this reflects typical Hebrew thinking on the place of women in society is not the question; it paints a picture of what a noble woman could be. As usual, it's a mistake to read it with legalistic literalism that was never native to Eastern thinking. The words are meant to draw a picture of a real lady.

It would be easy to read our modern prejudices back into this, but we must bear in mind the images reflect a culture that simply does not exist any longer in our world today. Do we need a reminder that our lives are poorer for that reason? This is how God thinks things should be. The emphasis is not on how much work she does and how much income she brings into the household. Rather, the whole point is that she embraces her moral identity as God revealed it. She is committed to the welfare of her household. She might be pushy at times, but the objective is not demanding her way. She does all she can within the moral constraints of her gender to build the nest. If it requires working with her own hands, then she does it. No job is too dirty or too hard; no stone is left unturned in search for household welfare. She is loyal to her husband and promotes his reputation. Her agenda is divine justice, so she always has enough to share with the unfortunate.

So, while the imagery is drawn from the ruling class, what it tells us of a proper feminine character would apply all the way down to the economic bottom. The poorest man is still a petty king over some minuscule domain; his wife is still the lady of the house within whatever means are at hand.

At the end, we realize what this is all about: Don't be a sucker for a pretty face or social charisma. This is still good moral matronly advice to a young prince. Give your heart to a lady who is on your team from the start. She might do none of these things specifically, but if she exhibits this kind of character, latch onto her. She's an asset, not an expense. You'll never regret choosing this one over all the others.