

Devotional comments on the book of Proverbs

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Contents

A Guide To The Reader	3
Proverbs 1	3
Proverbs 2	7
Proverbs 3	10
Proverbs 4	14
Proverbs 5	17
Proverbs 6	21
Proverbs 7	24
Proverbs 8	27
Proverbs 9	30
Proverbs 10	32
Proverbs 11	39
Proverbs 12	45
Proverbs 13	51
Proverbs 14	55
Proverbs 15	62
Proverbs 16	68
Proverbs 17	75
Proverbs 18	81
Proverbs 19	86
Proverbs 20	92
Proverbs 21	98
Proverbs 22	104
Proverbs 23	109
Proverbs 24	114
Proverbs 25	119
Proverbs 26	125
Proverbs 27	129
Proverbs 28	134
Proverbs 29	138
Proverbs 30	143
Proverbs 31	149

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Proverbs 1

The Proverbs are the accumulated wisdom with which God graciously endowed Solomon. He had shown a measure of wisdom in 1 Kings 2 in detecting the wiles of Adonijah but not so much wisdom perhaps in his hasty sentence of Adonijah to death. His dealings with Abiathar seem just; but again a little hasty perhaps with Joab, though he was aware of being the minister of the LORD to return his blood upon his own head (2.32). In 1 Kings 3, in response to God's invitation to "ask what I shall give thee," Solomon asked for an understanding heart to judge the Lord's people and to discern between good and bad (3.9). Solomon's request pleased the Lord who replied, "Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee" (3.12). The quality of Solomon's exercise of this God-given wisdom (as distinct from his natural wisdom displayed in 1 Kings 2) is seen in 1 Kings 3. 16-28 and this book of the Proverbs is the distillation of years of experience.

The Proverbs direct us to exercise this God-given wisdom as distinct from any natural wisdom with which as human beings we may be naturally endowed. The experience of ruling in the Spirit (as kings unto God) is here made available by the same Holy Spirit to us, by moving King Solomon to write these things.

Now it was not a condition of Solomon being granted such wisdom that he should be already perfect. Far from it. Indeed, he asked because of a felt need. We are told in 1 Kings 3.3 that he loved the LORD. That counts for everything. God graciously declares that he may "ask what I shall give thee" but earlier in that same chapter we see that he had made affinity with Pharaoh's daughter and brought her to Jerusalem (thus by disobedience later undoing much of the wisdom with which he was entrusted) and that he sacrificed and burnt incense in high places (1 Kings 3.3). As an imperfect believer, yet a lover of the LORD, he was able to receive and exercise wisdom. The Holy Spirit has moved him to warn us away from committing the same sins as Solomon did, and other sins which may plague us as believers, by causing him to write Ecclesiastes which shows how empty (vain) everything seems to a sinning, and as yet unrepentant, believer. The sequel, equally graciously moved by the Holy Spirit, is the

Song of Solomon in which a restored Solomon (like the restored believer) is granted great intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ.

We may receive this wisdom, though we are imperfect believers, because we love the Lord Jesus Christ. We are taught in 1 Corinthians 1:27-30 that God has chosen us as foolish things of the world, and weak things, and base things, and despised things to bring to nought things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence. Christ is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. In Christ we may apply for wisdom in every situation – the most important and the least important; the short term and the long term. The Proverbs will school us from the very beginning of our Christian lives in the wisdom which is to be found in Christ, while it will supply the God-fearer (who may be elect but not yet saved) with secular good sense. We are instructed in James 1:5 to ask God for wisdom who will not tell us off for not having it. (I think that wisdom is here taken as an example of the way in which we may approach the Saviour for any necessary help, not only wisdom.)

In Proverbs 1:1-6 Solomon states the purpose of this particular collection, assembled under the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, for we read (1 Kings 4:32), “he spake 3000 proverbs; and his songs were 1005.” We have only one song by permission of the Holy Spirit and just this collection of Solomon’s proverbs.

The aim is for us to know wisdom and instruction and to perceive words of understanding. In other words - to learn to be wise and to receive instruction carefully; and to spot, distinguish and prioritise true words. The mastery of wisdom will enable us to be just, to discriminate in complex situations and be fair (exercising equity) and above board. Even the most disadvantaged learner will gather insight, while schoolchildren may add experience as they learn. Those already at an advanced stage of achievement will flourish by the application of wisdom to a multiplicity of situations and at the pinnacle of his/her career may impart strategic advice. Taught by the Holy Spirit the believer will be able to distinguish in the Holy Scriptures what is picture language (parables and proverbs) and unravel deep mysteries (dark sayings) as in Psalm 49:4 thereby assimilating the highest knowledge.

All wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD. An atheist does not even begin and may be deprived even of common sense wisdom. Proverbs 1:7 tells us “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” while Psalm 111:10 goes one step further and informs us that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” that is, knowledge applied in all sorts of life situations. And in what is probably the earliest book of the Bible, Job, contemporary perhaps with Abraham, we read “unto man he said, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (Job 28:28). The conclusion of the whole purpose of attaining wisdom is to “fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

God addresses us through Solomon as sons and pleads with us not to despise these things and become fools. It is a characteristic of the unregenerate heart, or the careless believer, to despise the Lord's instruction. Two examples must suffice – from Jeremiah 6.16, 17. "We will not walk therein." "We will not hearken."

Firstly, we are exhorted to follow in the footsteps of our believing parents. Or if they are unbelievers at least to honour our parents and follow the example of their good ways until by coming to years of discretion we may learn a better way in Christ. And (it is picture language) their instruction will beautify us, for the Lord beautifies the meek with salvation. In Ephesians 5 & 6 husbands, wives, children, fathers and servants are addressed in turn concerning their responsibilities in the Lord. Children are spoken to directly, as they are in Proverbs 1.8 and other places. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long upon the earth." (Ephesians 6. 1-3). It is for parents to draw the attention of their children to these and similar passages if they are not aware of them or if they have been forgotten.

Now in Proverbs 1.8 and 1.10 (other places also) these children have grown up into teenagers or young men and women and are addressed directly. Of course they can and should be taught these things when younger and store them up in their hearts and be reminded of them. "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not" (Proverbs 1.10). The first thing children and young people meet outside the home is the temptation to do things with their friends that they would not do at home or as individuals. They have to learn to consent not to things which, however tempting or plausible they sound, are not according to the Biblical standards in which they have been brought up. Many children, more particularly young people and young adults, do things at this time of life which live with them for ever and which they regret in later life. The Proverbs should form an essential part of the teaching of young people's groups.

"Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of the bird" (Proverbs 1.17). The bird is sensible enough to spot danger unless it is concealed. If young people are warned about these things it should be sufficient to turn them aside from evil. However, "the ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider" (Isaiah 1.3). Constant reminders are given us from the Lord because we are as stubborn in childhood and in youth as in adult life for, in that sense, the child is the father of the man. Satan is a great deceiver, a liar from the beginning, and we do not always spot his deceptions.

But it is their own lives the young are spoiling, even destroying, when they get so involved. "And they lay wait for their own blood; they lurk privily for their own lives" (Proverbs 1.18). While they plan to hurt others it is their own consciences and physical

lives that are impaired. It is at this time of life that smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, lust, covetousness and many other things take root and it may be among such friends that the seeds of discontent with being among the Lord's people and observing the Lord's Day according to commandment are sown. Furthermore greediness of gain soon sets in and becomes ingrained in lifestyle.

Now to this situation wisdom addresses itself but falls largely on deaf ears. They may not listen to the pastor or parent; sermons or pleadings. There may come a time when external pleadings are withdrawn if they are too long unheeded, but the Holy Spirit addresses the Proverbs that it may be available to sinners. How long will sinners continue unabated in their sin? Every moment is too long, for it leads to another sin, and another - heaping up destruction. "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man..." for thou "treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath" (Romans 2. 1,5).

"Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: she crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the opening of the gates: in the city she uttereth her voice..." (Proverbs 1. 20-21). This passage directs us to consider the love of Christ for sinners, that by open-air preaching, door to door visitation, tracts and other external means those who are passing by, ignoring the house of God where they might learn wisdom on a regular basis every Lord's Day, can yet be appealed to and warned. How few turn at this reproof! Yet some do, and for their sakes it is worth it to do these things as ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5.20).

"Turn you at my reproof: behold I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you" (Proverbs 1.23). Here the Lord Jesus Christ promises His Spirit in abundance (poured out) to those who repent, with a further promise of continual instruction to lift them far away from their former temptations and ignorance. He would rather be a kind personal Tutor than stand by and see men and women, particularly young men and women, continue heedlessly to destruction.

There is an awful consequence of ignoring the Lord's claims upon us, because we have immortal souls. While there is not a bird that perishes "without your Father" (Matthew 10.29) disobedient men and women may perish unaided by God. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10.31). "I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh" (Proverbs 1.26). No sympathy comes from Almighty God when for years, as long as it suited us, we waved aside His loving approaches to us. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision" (Psalm 2.4). Though dying men and women may brazen it out, yet they will not be without "a certain fearful looking for of judgment" (Hebrews 10.27); and though, in a settled course of sin men and women may say they do not care, there will be apprehension. If we do not choose the fear of the LORD, and it has to be a chosen direction, if we would have none of His counsel, who as our Creator has a claim upon us and will demand an account of our thoughts, words and actions, then

we may expect to pay the consequences. “But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from the fear of evil” (Proverbs 1.33). “Who maketh thee to differ from another?” (1 Corinthians 4.7) It is God who, if He grants grace to repent, distinguishes us from those who are allowed to continue in their chosen evil ways. It is a marvellous thing for, maybe, we ran our destruction awfully close and we have seen some who have gone that bit too far and never turned back.

“For the turning away of the simple shall slay them” (Proverbs 1.32). The act of turning away from God, however early in life, may precipitate a downward course that shall ultimately lead to destruction. Though it may be disguised by relative wealth and its trappings, if our priority is not “the wisdom that is from above” (James 3. 17) we will be deceived at last. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6.33) says the Lord Jesus Christ. And again, He pleads, “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16.26).

Proverbs 2

Solomon is the penman but the Spirit of Christ which was in him directs us to prize wisdom as a most significant possession of the Christian life. All through our lives we are to pursue it and seek it from the Lord Himself to cope with all the many, varied situations which confront us personally, in the home, the workplace and church.

The emphasis in the first four verses is on the earnestness with which we should desire to attain to wisdom. Such expressions as “incline thine ear,” “apply thine heart,” “criest after knowledge,” “lifest up thy voice,” “seekest her,” “searchest for her” denote that an increasing intensity of desire for wisdom is the means of being blessed with it. One reason for desiring it may be that we perceive within ourselves a propensity to act hastily; or we might observe in young Christians that their ways of thinking are brought over as baggage when they are converted from the world and we need the patience of wisdom to show them a better way; we might find ourselves in a situation within the church where few think like we do and we shall feel the need to seek wisdom as to how to deal graciously with the situation. Or we may be drawn to seek salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ believing that “ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29.13).

“If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures” (Proverbs 2.4) encourages us to put a value upon wisdom which exceeds anything we could buy in this world and to work for its benefits as hard as in our workplace. When the gift of wisdom is imparted, it is of the Lord’s doing, for “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1.17). That it is a gift that needs to be worked for seems a contradiction in terms. It is no more so than in Isaiah 55.1 “Ho,

everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” If a thing is free people tend to grab the offer without appreciating it. The meaning in the Proverbs, as in Isaiah, is that though wisdom (and salvation in Isaiah) is free it must be valued and longed for.

Wisdom in its initial imparting brings us to fear the LORD and to open our eyes to the character of God – holy, eternal, all powerful and seeing all things. “For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2.6). This is another way of saying that His word, His speech conveys knowledge and understanding and there can be no more essential knowledge than that which the Supreme Teacher gives. Of the Lord Jesus Christ it was said that “never man spake like this man” (John 7.46). That speech is enshrined for us in the Bible which the Lord has directed to be written down as a permanent record for us. All that we need to know to obtain life in the Lord Jesus Christ and to continue in it is written in the Holy Scriptures. To assimilate it and to apply it to the current situation of our lives means that we must call upon the Holy Spirit’s aid daily.

The Lord is always active in His creation. He delights to be proactive in the lives of believers. “He layeth up sound wisdom”, “he is a buckler (a shield which is easy to carry),” “he keepeth the paths of judgment,” “he preserveth the way of his saints” (Proverbs 2. 7-8). All these wonderful provisions reveal His never ceasing interaction with His people. No wonder the psalmist says “whereunto I may continually resort” (Psalm 71.3).

There are four pictures here. “He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous” shows His people how that in the holy scriptures He has provided a storehouse full of good things. Each of these has been laid up under the Holy Spirit’s direction by successive scripture writers. They are sound, that is life-giving, because true and because they speak of eternal things of which man could know nothing unless God had revealed them. “He is a buckler to them that walk uprightly.” A buckler is a lightweight shield for everyday use (rather than in formal battle) for defence and protection at all times. By His presence he defends us from the assaults and onslaughts of the evil one, the half of which are not told us. We do not know the near misses either physically, morally, mentally or spiritually; when Satan desired to destroy us and we were preserved unawares. “He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints.” If we compare scripture with scripture we shall see that one of the finest explanations of this active preservation is laid out for us in Psalm 121, especially in verses 3,4,7,8. In verse 8, for example, it is declared, “The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth and even for evermore”. When we go out till we come in. When we come in till we go out. Why, that’s all the time! And when we consider that this help is from God Himself. “My help cometh from the

LORD, which made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121.2) how powerful this help is! Yet we must always remember that the Lord loves to hear our voice; “I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them” (Ezekiel 36.37).

To keep a path (Proverbs 2.8) may suggest keeping it from being overgrown, so that it may be used, and tidy for the pleasure of those who walk. Our heavenly Father will make right judgments on behalf of His people and lead them throughout their lives. Or if the emphasis is on the judgments which believers are to make frequently in their lives about all sorts of matters He keeps them from error, from being deceived, from misreading situations and enables them to see what lies behind events which present themselves. All this encourages us towards the acquisition of such wisdom; “Then shalt thou understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path” (Proverbs 2.9).

At Proverbs 2.12 we are shown some of the snares from which wisdom, when once it has entered the heart and is pleasing to us, will keep us. Discretion suggests to us tactfulness (which is always welcome) but here probably particularly refers to being able to distinguish between the precious and the vile; the good and the evil; and to evaluate priorities. These snares can come from evil men or evil women. The way of the evil man is “froward.” “Froward” is the opposite of “toward” or “towards.” It signifies “fromwards”. Instead of being turned towards God and all His ways, this is a description of one who has turned away from God. It receives great emphasis here being mentioned three times. Proverbs 2.12 refers to speaking things that are ungodly; verse 14 to the wicked enjoyment of being profane; and verse 15 to the actions and lifestyle of such. The wisdom which is from above will enable us to see and loathe what goes on behind the scenes in their gatherings; and in their minds and hearts.

When it comes to an evil woman “which forsaketh the guide of her youth and forgetteth the covenant of her God” what is mainly intended is the siren voice of sexual enticement. The word “strange” often means “foreign” or, at least, “from another part” and therefore unknown as to background as in “stranger”. But it mostly refers to “strange” ways which “estrangle” her from God; ways which are contrary to God’s law, in which she was very probably brought up and from which, preferring fleshly lusts, she has turned aside. She introduces to the unwary youth evil things of which he may not even be aware which will defile him for ever. “For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead. None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life” (Proverbs 2. 18-19). Such defilement of conscience will befoul those who are brought into her clutches as will never leave them. There is a risk that even when and if delivered from her they will never be entirely free of the shame. Perhaps even a dread disease will indeed lead to an early death.

A good conscience comes from such wisdom as God gives and this is to be greatly prized. When God's approval embraces us, when His Spirit "beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Romans 8.16), what a boost it gives to our energies! What life it imparts! What encouragement to continue! Whereas the guilty sinner, unless he repents through God's grace, is overtaken by "a certain fearful looking for of judgment" (Hebrews 10.27) which is to be avoided at all costs and from which heavenly wisdom warns us most severely.

Proverbs 3

The Proverbs constantly addresses us as dear children. "My son," the son in whom the travail of the Saviour's soul in making an atonement for sin through His sacrificial death upon the cross is dear to His heart and He perfecteth that which concerneth him (Psalm 138.8). Time and time again the believer is addressed as "My son." For the principle of learning, the method the Lord uses is "precept...upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (Isaiah 28.10) which the unwise reject, being bored with the whole idea, for "the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken" (Isaiah 28.13).

The ultimate end of wisdom is everlasting life in Christ. "Length of days, and long life, and peace shall they add to thee" (Proverbs 3.2). A very easy to hand and practical example of this is the 5th commandment, "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee" (Exodus 20.12). As we saw before, the fulfilment of this promise must be distinctly requested and prayed for, "I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them" (Ezekiel 36.37). Of the 5th commandment Paul writes that it is the first commandment with promise (Ephesians 6.2), that is, with a promise attached.

Mercy and truth are so fundamental to Christian character that they are spoken of, in picture language, as being so much part of us that they are enthroned in our very thinking (the neck supports the head) and our very affectionate emotions, for they are inscribed in our heart. These characteristics do in fact draw people to us, as it is written "so shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man" (Proverbs 3.4). It was this, no doubt, which caused the boy Jesus to be held in affection in the days before His public ministry, as we read in Luke 2.52 "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 4. 5-6). These memorable verses are worth learning by heart, for even in maturity we need to be reminded from within that we need to acknowledge our heavenly Father in all our

ways. They speak of the daily providences of God, which are most delightful to trace. “Ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?” (Matthew 6.3) We should surely have more proficiency and find more delight in observing the providences of our God and acting upon them than in observing the weather, of which it is written, “He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap” (Ecclesiastes 11.4). We do not know best. And the more we like to be in charge of our own lives, the more we need to remember that our Creator is the best One to have charge of them. If we run past Him all our ideas, and pray concerning every issue, we may be certain that the unfolding of His providences (that is, the circumstances He provides) are precisely right. And if they seem adverse, it is for our good, though we would not have chosen it so, “for he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men” (Lamentations 3.33).

“Be not wise in thine own eyes” (Proverbs 3.7). The Lord knows better than we do. We do not have a corner on wisdom, and in the multitude of counsellors there is safety (Proverbs 11.14). “Honour the Lord with thy substance.” The acknowledging of the goodness we receive from the Lord is the certain way to receive more blessings. Think how you respond to, what you think of ungrateful persons. “I won’t help them again,” we say. “Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him” (1 Corinthians 16.2). It is to be the firstfruits of our increase – the first, not what is left over; put aside (laid by in store), if need be, for other causes than that which is put into the offering on the Lord’s Day.

“My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD, neither be weary of his correction: for whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth” (Proverbs 3.11-12). The best opening up of these verses is that by Paul in Hebrews 12. 1-13 in which the Holy Spirit has inspired him to elaborate upon these verses that they may be spelled out to us. The Hebrews 12 passage should be read through carefully, studied, and prayed over before proceeding any further with this commentary, for I have not commented more, seeing that Hebrews is provided for us. Chastening is not easy to bear and we must not pass over these verses quickly, for real chastening itself may last correspondingly for some considerable time. We need to take these verses in, constantly, throughout any affliction. Let us reflect upon the delight our Father has in us that He should be so keen to remove all our imperfections.

After the misery of chastening, Solomon is moved by the Holy Spirit to describe the happiness of possessing wisdom. To possess wisdom is better than having lots of money, for its purchasing power is of things which money can’t buy. It is beautifully put, “She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her” (Proverbs 3.15). To possess wisdom in Christ is better than all the world’s goods; but, even then, it still brings other wonderful things in its wake. So

its possession is good; but, further, its purchasing power is to buy pleasurable commodities. In Proverbs 3.16-17 length of days, riches with honour, pleasantness, peace, a full life, and happiness are all listed. Verse 18 speaks of the wisdom which is in Christ restoring what was lost in Adam, for Genesis 3.22 speaks of the loss of the tree of life. Proverbs 3. 19-20 remind believers that the foundations of their life are underpinned by the very same wisdom with which the earth was founded and the heavens were made; the depths broken up and the dew distilled. In wisdom we are held in an embrace as vast as the heavens; themselves a picture of the vastness of eternity and eternal love. Just as the depths are broken up, so the sinful heart is broken up and melted; as with the dew, the scriptures and the issues of life are distilled to perfect that which concerneth us (Psalm 138.8). Speaking of the glory which shall be in heaven one hymnwriter has written, "And there's another country I've heard of long ago, most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know...And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase, and her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths of peace". It is not an exact allusion, but, seeing that the glorious kingdom of our dear Saviour is made up of souls who have been trained by that very wisdom spoken of in the Proverbs, it gives beautiful expression to its outcome.

Keep wisdom always in view. Always act wisely. Always act in Christ, "who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1.30). Then will relationships be kept soundly and church meetings kept graciously. We speak of those who are the soul of discretion. "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing" (Proverbs 25.2). The LORD promises to be the confidence of those who keep wisdom always in view. It is the blessing which "maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10.22). It is not said that David wrote Psalm 121. If he did, his son Solomon might especially value it. At all events, do read it through now in conjunction with verses 23, 24 & 26. It is equally possible that he may have learned Psalm 46 from his father, even if David was not its author, and verses 2 & 3 of that psalm should certainly be read in conjunction with Proverbs 3.25.

Most businesses operate with monthly invoices. Payment is expected within a month. Small businessmen have been made bankrupt when large agencies and corporations have delayed payment for contracts fulfilled for which they have borne the price of purchasing materials and labour in advance. Here is a principle for equitable business arrangements. But individuals should immediately pay for services rendered when they have the means to hand to do it.

There is much in Leviticus and Deuteronomy about how we should treat our neighbours. The 9th and 10th commandments (Exodus 20.16-17) are perhaps the most famous expressions of this concern. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy

neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's." We will, for the most part, see more of our neighbours than most others. We should, as far as possible, endeavour to live peaceably with them. We should not cause them anxiety, certainly; and, hopefully, they will not cause us needless trouble.

Sometimes we find ourselves pleading with God about unjustifiable actions towards us that have caused us grief. David frequently does so in the psalms, for he frequently encountered this sort of behaviour. Precisely because we will do so too, the psalms are there to assist us in our turn. Psalm 35 shows us perhaps how we should not pray but rather leave the vengeance to the Lord. "Without cause they have hid for me their net in a pit" (Psalm 35.7) and in verses 4,5,6 & 8 he prays for retribution. Doubtless what David prays for will be their end, without repentance, but it is not for us to pray for it in Christ. There is a better way, but things that happen to us "without cause" are common. In Proverbs 3.30 it is being emphasised that **we** should not cause unnecessary grief to others. A schoolchild soon learns that if he is picked upon (fights or words) if he hits back (words or fights) he is the one that always seems to be caught and usually he hits back harder; harder perhaps than is proportionate. So the Saviour teaches turning the other cheek, going the second mile (Matthew 5. 39,41), as He also instructs us, "whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (Matthew 5.22). Prayer to our Saviour is the way to handle these things and find encouragement in our God notwithstanding man's inhumanity to man.

Envy, we say, is a green-eyed monster. If we have been kept under the thumb over a long period, we may wish for situations to be reversed so that we could have our turn of bullying. It is abomination. There is a better way, known to those whose lives are hid with Christ in God (Colossians 3.3), and therefore the springs of their actions (Psalm 87.7) are kept hidden from, are secret to the world at large. "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty" (Psalm 91.1). "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant" (Psalm 25.14). From of old Job loved the secret experience, and we should treasure it too. "Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me...as I was in the days of my youth, when the secret of God was upon my tabernacle" (Job 29 2,4). He loved those secret preservations, secret providences – secret in the sense that they were known only to him, a bond between a loving heavenly Father and a devoted child.

The punishment of the old nature is that it has brought down upon itself a curse (Genesis 3. 14,17) and it follows that a punishment of curse follows all its evil ways. A believer should not only avoid the ways of the world (Psalm 1, 1-2), as far as possible consistently with the actual necessity of living in the world; but positively should

pursue within his own home and church - indeed, whatever might be described as a believer's habitation - such ways as God approves and will bring down His blessing.

All God's justice corresponds to the nature of the sin. "Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy" (Revelation 16. 5-6). Also, "they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai" (Esther 7.10). So it is that God "scorneth the scorners". By contrast, God who resists the proud, "giveth grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5.5). "He giveth more grace" (James 4.6). "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work" (2 Corinthians 9.8).

We speak of promotion to glory, meaning that the saints leave this life for the presence and glory of God. There is no wisdom like the wisdom that embraces Christ Jesus our Lord. Daniel expresses the force of this exactly:- "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12. 2-3).

Proverbs 4

Solomon was an instructor to his children and also was taught by his own father. He bids us by the Holy Spirit listen to him as to a father in the faith. It is the Lord's divine way that instruction is passed on down the years. It gives the latest generation a sense of belonging to the earliest. It is the wisdom of every believer, whether fresh to the faith or a mature Christian, to "attend to know understanding".

The Lord Jesus prayed, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word" (John 17.20). Paul writes *of* Timothy, "...I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also" (2 Timothy 1.5). Paul writes *to* Timothy, "...the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2.2). Always a succession of those taught in the word. And always by the same method that we have already encountered in Isaiah 28, "Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine?...for precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (verses 9-10).

Good doctrine is paramount. It is to be found throughout the Bible. Paul was insistent that no other doctrine than that should be preached and goes on to say "neither give

heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith" (1 Timothy 1. 3-4). Jesus taught that religious traditions were misinformed if they transgressed the commandment of God (Matthew 15. 2-3) and should always be examined by that standard, saying, "in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (verse 9). In verses 5&6 of the same chapter he quotes an example of such an ill-usage and concludes, "thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition". Paul also writes "beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2. 8-9). We see how endemic this is; we all bring many erroneous teachings over from our old life and Bible-based Christianity labours to discard them. If we claim to be believers but trust in non-Biblical teachings we are likely to be deceived. And bearing in mind how terrible Satan's deceitfulness as the father of lies is we must be very careful.

"Let thine heart retain my words." Retention in the memory is important. But retention in the heart is of the greatest significance. To love the Lord and therefore to hold His word in great affection is the surest way to safety on our pilgrimage. Once again we remember that Christ is made wisdom unto us by God; He is the wisdom to Whom our hearts are led by the schoolmaster whose name is Law. Not only should we not turn from Him but should be kept by Him. Wisdom, such wisdom, is the principal thing – life is but loss without Him. With all our getting, nothing is achieved of consequence unless by Christ and for Christ. Promotion to the highest calling and all it entails, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3.14) and honour (Psalm 91.15) is the reward of embracing Christ and His wise counsels, guidance and help. True beauty, the beauty of holiness, will be seen in us by those with an eye for such things, but we will ourselves appreciate the splendour of such an ornament decorating our lives. We need no earthly medals or decorations.

The first commandment with promise is a promise of long life (Exodus 20.12) and so it is throughout the scriptures, as for example in Psalm 91.16. And everlasting life with Christ is the long life most to be desired.

We need to plead for our children, for they do not always take heed of good advice. It cannot be said, even, that Solomon was always wise to follow the instruction of his father David (Proverbs 4.4). Immaturity loves to explore away from the right paths; and middle years can still prove a temptation. But we are able to run the race that is set before us without stumbling following the directions of the Saviour. Our life is hid with Christ in God (Colossians 3.3). This is our life.

The Lord speaks of two ways. "Broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat...but narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few

there be that find it” (Matthew 7. 13-14). In Proverbs 14.12 and 16.25 the Holy Spirit will return to this theme, for it is so vital. So we have here, “Enter not into the path of the wicked” (verse 14) and “the path of the just is as the shining light” (verse 18).

We may choose an evil way and tread it secretly, no one knowing; but more generally it is evil company that leads us astray. But we are led astray first when we desire that company rather than Christ. Let there not be a parting of the ways between yourself and Christ. In the words of Joshua, “If it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve...but as for me, and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24.15).

The great attraction of the path of the just (that is, of those who are justified by faith) is that the way becomes increasingly brighter and the destination more visible to the eye of faith. Verse 18 is a memorable verse, such as may entice us to take this narrow way which few find. “The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.”

We must not be surprised or stumbled that ingrained sin causes some to turn to wickedness and violence. If we should be the victims, let our faith not be affected except to be strengthened in the Lord. There are those whose sole delight is to cause some to fall; whether to fall from the faith or to cause them hurt - and so long as there is sin in the world it must not surprise us.

The words of Christ’s wisdom run counter to fleshly wisdom but they are life and health. “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man...” (Matthew 15. 19-20). The thoughts which arise from the heart’s affections direct our actions unless they are disciplined. From this fountain issue many evils, for our hearts by nature are impure.

There are not only issues of life but issues from death. “He that is our God is the God of salvation; and unto GOD the Lord belong the issues from death” (Psalm 68.20). Once we pass from this earthly scene our souls are under the immediate command of God and the judgment which follows, to heaven or to hell. They are under His sovereign direction. Jesus sets this out clearly in Matthew 25. 31-46. The issues of life and the issues from death are of such life determining significance that we should attend to them very closely.

Next follows a catalogue (for easy remembrance) concerning mouth, eyes, feet and hand. Actually the heart was the first in this list because it gives direction to the important things which follow.

We are to let our words be considered and relatively few, not tumbling out about all sorts of things which may prove to be both ill-considered and ill-advised. Our words are not to be such that put a bad construction on everything or speech which perverts the true meaning, the received doctrine and may lead others astray.

We are not to be voyeurs, else like David in the matter of Bathsheba, we may be tempted to sin with possible dreadful consequences for those who love us as well as for ourselves. We are to consider, to weigh well, all our intentions and actions with their possible consequences. We are to keep to the path of life, turning not aside to by-path meadow. Isaiah describes the ministry of the Holy Spirit thus:- “Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left” (Isaiah 30.21). Blessed is the one who takes heed.

Proverbs 5

In every situation which we meet we need wisdom to react rightly, to the Lord’s glory. And in every initiative which we take the grace of the Lord Jesus is required. So we are urged to regard discretion and keep knowledge; especially that we may “keep the door of our lips” (Psalm 141.3). We are going to encounter much more teaching about watching over our lips as we progress through the book.

The Bible is not structured thematically, that is to say subject by subject, as in a specialist textbook or an encyclopaedia. It is possible, for learning purposes, to go through the scriptures and group together the teaching, say, on the sinfulness of man, or the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ, but the Bible does not do it in this way.

Likewise, we come across the “strange woman” a number of times. The woman who is estranged from God and whose design is to lead the unwary astray. All the warnings are not grouped in one place but scattered so that we may come upon them frequently and be frequently warned. We are reminded much later on in the Bible, “He that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption” (Galatians 6.8). The strange woman is a frequent danger all down the years and therefore there is need of many reminders. We are warned not to be taken in by her smooth speech because her design is gratification and with such gratification comes ruin; “her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell” (Proverbs 5.5). Don’t give her a second glance. Don’t even think about it. “Lest thou shouldst ponder the path of life, her ways are moveable” (Proverbs 5.6). She will always find some justification to ensnare you. She will use Satan’s subtle techniques of sneering, and casting doubt on the truth of God’s word especially when that word seems opposed to natural pleasure. “Hath God said?...Ye shall not surely die...When the woman saw that the tree was good for food...she took of the fruit and did eat” (Genesis 3. 1,4,6).

“Her ways are moveable” (Proverbs 5.6). Moral standards are eroded by relativism – that is, that there are no absolute standards. That what is suitable to one may not be appropriate for another. Or, there are times to bend the rules a little or situations that do not require absolute honesty. It is difficult at times to perceive what lies at the bottom of all this double dealing – “thou canst not know them” – but we may be sure there is corruption at root.

“Remove thy ways far from her” (5.8). Here is a general principle. To separate ourselves from the source of sin, from sinful situations is good, scriptural advice. At the other end of the Bible we still have the same message, “Flee youthful lusts” (2 Timothy 2.22). Concerning idolatry it is written, “come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing” (2 Corinthians 6.17) and the passage refers also to a formal linking (in business partnership, in marriage partnership) with unbelievers. The Lord Jesus Whom we serve is described thus:- “Holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Hebrews 7.26) and should we not in our small way, in our different situations, emulate Him?

“Lest...thou mourn at the last” (5.11). It is one thing to take pleasure in sinful activity and it may be exciting while it lasts, but we are warned that there is a disagreeable consequence to be had. “Ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh” (Proverbs 1. 25-26). If we persist in enjoying wicked ways and ignore the Father’s warning words this will be the consequence. “I was almost in all evil in the midst of the congregation and assembly” (Proverbs 5.14). Not the least of the regretful recollections will have been the thought of frequently attending with the Lord’s people with a guilty conscience of continuing sin; and the thought that they may be polluted by such secret sins.

Single-minded devotion to the Lord; single-minded devotion to our husbands or wives is a sure way of preserving our lives unblemished. How the Lord loved the church and gave Himself for it is set out in Ephesians 5. 25-29 and includes the words “so ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh”. But in giving our bodies to the strange woman, or in any parallel situation, we are destroying ourselves. “Lest thou give thine honour unto others, and thy years to the cruel: lest strangers be filled with thy wealth; and thy labours be in the house of a stranger” (Proverbs 5. 9-10).

On the contrary, “Drink waters out of thine own cistern...let them only be thine own, and not strangers’ with thee” (Proverbs 5. 15,17). This is picture language for the freedom and purity which right living according to God’s word imparts. In its most sublime application it reminds us of the freedom of living in the Spirit. “Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of

the Spirit” (John 3. 7-8). “Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive)” (John 7. 37-39). “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5.1). “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free...whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin...if the Son, therefore, shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8. 31,32, 34,36).

We see here the principle that true freedom lies in restraint. One husband, one wife. One only Lord. “Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth” (Proverbs 5.18). If untainted; if there is faithfulness, there will be free joy unalloyed. Not that there will not be trials and tribulations, for “man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5.7). But there will be no insidious undercurrent of a persistent guilty conscience. That word “only” in the expression “let them be only thine own” (Proverbs 5.17) speaks of a clear fountain, a pure conscience, a mind at peace.

“The ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, and he pondereth all his goings” (Proverbs 5.21). To ponder is to think; but it comes from a word which means to weigh. So when the Lord thinks on us, he weighs our doings, He evaluates them. Again, this is a theme which we meet constantly in the scriptures because we constantly need to be brought to reflect that our actions are weighed in the balance (Daniel 5.27). The passage in Daniel refers to Belshazzar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar. His father had been temporarily deposed from his kingdom. When Nebuchadnezzar’s heart was lifted up “and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: and he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will. And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; but hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven...” (Daniel 5. 20-23).

Ignorance of the law is no excuse at law. But to know what is required and then to flout it is particularly blameworthy. The Lord observes the happenings, the things we do and weighs well why we do them. This is a constant theme of the Bible.

It is also a scriptural theme which appears from time to time that “his own iniquities shall take the wicked himself” (Proverbs 5.22). Haman, you remember, was hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for another (Esther 7.10). The final and most significant examples are in Revelation 16. 5-6 “Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of

saints, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy” and Revelation 18. 4-7 “Come ye out of her, my people, that ye be not partaker of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities. Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works... how much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her.”

We all know that habits grip like a vice and it is terribly difficult to stop whatever it is, even if we know it is ruining our life. We cannot deliver ourselves from our sins. Our only hope is to cry to the Saviour, “Deliver me from all my transgressions” (Psalm 39.8) for “when thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth” (Psalm 39.11).

“In the greatness of his folly shall he go astray” (Proverbs 5.23). Others can see the foolishness of the one in the midst of his sinful way but while he is doing it he is oblivious of all else and cares not for the spectacle he is making of himself.

The greater the reputation, the greater the sin, the harder the fall. To the sinner who dies in his sins, without repentance, a warm welcome awaits in hell. Those who have committed such sins before await. “Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming...all they shall speak and say unto thee, art thou become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?” And in turn all such shall be gathered finally to welcome Satan, here called Lucifer, “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground! ...They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, and consider thee, saying, is this the man that made the earth to tremble?” (Isaiah 14. 9-16). Such will be the welcome of those who have led others astray when they themselves are finally condemned with those who have been dragged down by them.

The Bible is faithful. Death is constantly held before the sinner as he sins. “He shall be holden with the cords of his sins. He shall die without instruction” (Proverbs 5.22-23). We have already been warned by the same principle in Proverbs 1. 30,32. “They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof...the turning away of the simple shall slay them”. The sinner is faithfully warned of the short and long term consequences of his sinful action. That, as likely as not, he is even hastening his death. This theme constantly crops up in the scriptures, that no matter what our sins, no matter where we may be reading in the Bible or what the preacher is preaching to us, the sinner is always warned of the consequences of his sin. Always the Saviour pleads with him to escape. But if there is no repentance “there remaineth...a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation...” (Hebrews 10. 26-27). As the Bible begins to draw to its close, in the last book but one, Jude, we read – it comes across almost like hammer blows – “Behold, the Lord cometh...to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly

committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (Jude 14-15). Ungodly, ungodly, ungodly, ungodly. Let it not be that we have failed to heed the constant warnings of the scriptures and the constant pleadings of the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Proverbs 6

Sometimes a believer may commit himself rashly to some enterprise without consulting the Lord Jesus Christ and His wisdom. The first five verses of Proverbs 6 warn us in principle to pray without ceasing, but also provide a specific example. I suppose we are most likely to be familiar with the idea of suretyship from the use of the word “bail.” A friend deposits a substantial sum of money to be paid over if the person concerned fails to turn up (defaults) for a court appearance. The friend trusts that the accused will in fact turn up. But if for any reason he doesn’t, he is liable to pay this substantial sum. He will be a big loser, effectively all for nothing. This particular example fails in the sense that it would be impossible to withdraw once committed, so that the best advice is not to engage in such an agreement in any circumstances.

In very dramatic picture language, where Jesus might say “Behold” as in Matthew 6.26, “Behold the fowls of the air,” the believer is urged to observe carefully the business of the ant. Later, in Proverbs 30.24-25 it is written “there are four things which are little upon the earth but they are exceeding wise: the ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the summer.” Activity for the sake of activity is not recommended. But forethought and purposeful work is highly recommended and in it we are to be an example to others, as the ant is to the sluggard. Sometimes we have to work alone, or are trusted to work by ourselves or on our own initiative. A Christian young person entering sixth-form will now find there is much work to be done unsupervised, to be done as unto the Lord. The Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ is our Guide but He is invisible. We appear to have no guide, overseer or ruler. But one is our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It may be tempting to lie in bed. There is a gentle mocking here – “a little folding of the hands to sleep” – but the message is clear that it will inevitably lead to poverty. Opportunities and deadlines will be missed. And as certainly as there are travellers and armed professionals to be seen on journeys, poverty and need will approach towards the lazy one. As a traveller approaches or as an armed man, whether soldier or brigand, appears threateningly on the horizon to the one who, losing all sense of the Lord’s purpose for life, drifts into being, in current jargon, a couch potato.

We speak of naughty children, having in mind varying degrees of disobedience or wilfulness. The word means “of nought,” “of nothing,” with the connotation of accomplishing nothing of value, worthless, and, more than that, taking initiatives in all manner of corruption and evil. The speech of the worthless adolescent or adult is

vulgar, and filth and empty words pour out in profusion. His body language is honed to innuendo, the “nudge, nudge; wink, wink” of those who do not actually say what they mean but we are to get the general impression of things immoral and illicit.

The Lord has given ten commandments, so we are not to understand this “six or seven” which commences in verse 16 as a complete list. Rather, it is a device to draw attention and the addition of a seventh (Six, did I say? No, there are seven) is designed to give us pause for thought. These things are the opposite of the wisdom that is in Christ; and we may pause over them in such a way as to seek the very opposite in Him. They are set out in a memorable way – six parts of our body are mentioned that we might link them and rehearse them in our minds by association with our physical frame. The seventh may, indeed, be a summary – it being a particular iniquity to exercise any or all of these vices against brethren whether they be close relatives or, most especially, brethren within the fellowship whom the Lord has loved and saved.

Pride here is linked with a haughty demeanour which may be strikingly revealed by our look. David, interestingly, speaks of the “foot of pride” (Psalm 36.11); the effect of pride is like a kick or a trip. Believers, on the contrary, are to be humble, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (1 Peter 5. 6-7). The tongue speaks, of course, what the mind tells it to, so is not the first cause. However, the words which come against us or we speak against others is how we become aware of the hostility (or affection) that is in another’s heart and mind. James is directed by the Holy Spirit to draw attention a number of times to this. “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” And, “the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell...the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be...Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom” (James 1. 19-20; 3. 5-13).

The hands are linked to physical attacks which may draw blood, to a lesser or greater degree even to the extent of manslaughter or murder. The first mention in scripture sets the tone (Genesis 4. 10-11). “What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand...”

What the heart deviseth, the members accomplish. Sooner or later unbridled feelings will break forth if we allow them unlimited sway in the region of the heart. "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man" (Matthew 15. 19-20). Instead of the believers' feet running to mischief, let them be wise and "run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12. 1-2).

Bearing false witness is a contravention of the ninth commandment and by definition incorporates lying. Its aim is to destroy another's credibility, reputation, honour and position in the community. "Discord among brethren" is a memorable phrase to help us avoid all semblance of such activity. Never forget Psalm 133. 1,3. "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!...for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore."

"My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother." These should be one and the same, and, that being so, a child should not find any chink to play one off against the other. Neither should a boy or a young man make any difference in his mind as to the obedience owed as much to mother as to father.

It is written "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119.105). The commandment of a mother and father should be in accordance to the word of God. They may have their ways of putting it across but it should be in perfect accord with the commandments of the Lord. So at all times, but perhaps most of all when a young person is leaving home and finding himself in a strange environment and exposed to temptations, the words taught sweetly by mother, or drummed into him by father and taught by the word of God, will be our "way of life." Before sleeping, or while lying awake is a proper time of reflection; awaking is a time of consecration of the day; and going is the time to live by principle and at all these times the commandments which we have received at home are our preeminent guides.

They will keep a young believer in particular from gross and heinous sin. But the sin which the Holy Spirit keeps reverting to, because the commandment needs to be a foundation deeply laid, is that of the lusting after the strange woman. For, if transgressed at a time of inexperience and vulnerability, it will lead to ruin and, maybe, an early death. Since her allurements are constantly repeated, the Holy Spirit in constancy warns time and time again of the consequences which themselves are of lasting significance.

"The precious life" of the soul will be jeopardised and faith undermined, perhaps for ever. Poverty will ensue because the ramifications of probable compensation are extensive, whether to an aggrieved husband, as probable in the scripture example, or, in our own day, in payments to an abandoned young wife for maintenance of mother

and child. The burning of a guilty conscience will be branded in the soul. In certain circumstances a thief is not despised. But an adulterer is despicable; in the eyes of his abandoned wife, his children who will resent that he walked out on their love and on their life; the one with whom he cohabits who may soon tire of him; and in the eyes of the community at large. Though a thief may restore sevenfold and in some measure make amends, there are no suitable amends for this. The price to be paid in loss of spiritual vitality, reproach, hatred (expressed in jealousy) and finance is of lasting consequence and the Holy Spirit reminds the believer that the price is too high to pay for a moment's lust or a dalliance of what will prove to be comparatively of but short duration.

The expression "he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul" (6.32) is a powerfully arresting one. Jesus uses the same argument in Mark 8. 36-37, "What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" If the whole world will not suffice will one small pleasure of lust or, as Esau, one morsel of meat when faint? It is said of Esau whose valuation of his birthright was so dismissive ("what profit shall this birthright do to me? Genesis 25.32) that it was profanity to reject his God-given right, and that though afterwards he regretted it bitterly and tearfully there was no reversal of this sin (Hebrews 12. 15-17). When Esau declared "I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?" he was wildly exaggerating, being only hungry and exhausted. When we are really at the point of death, our rejection of salvation, our playing fast and loose with the pleadings of God in our heart from the scriptures and the preaching ministry of faithful pastors will come back to haunt us; and who can tell if the Lord will permit an eleventh hour conversion? It is a risky call.

Other strong words caution the believer from transgressing in this way. A wound, dishonour, reproach, jealousy, vengeance and an implacable foe for life who will on no account be bought off – such is the bondage of this sin. And, in their measure, all sins lead to their own Satanic bondage. May the Lord deliver us from all evil. But the message of Proverbs is that prevention is better than cure.

Proverbs 7

There are two routes to eternal salvation. One of them is never at any time to fail to keep any commandment of the Lord. "Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 18.5). By the time we even become aware of this requirement, it is already too late. Just one sin, and it's already too late to come to eternal salvation this way. The other is to be horrified at the sin within and at how the holy God views our condition. "God is angry with the wicked every day" (Psalm 7.11). When the state in which we appear before the holy God has thoroughly permeated our being, the next step is to repent before God

and plead mercy. That mercy comes, should the Lord be graciously pleased to reveal it, only through the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary. He went to the cross willingly. He said, "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?" (Matthew 26. 53-54). Behind the outward events, the hidden, real purpose was that the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1.15) by making Himself a substitute for every guilty sinner that cries out to Him for mercy repenting of sin. Do read Psalm 32. 1-6 which begins, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven..."

So, "God is angry with the wicked every day." Solomon knew about this anger. Maybe David had taught Solomon his Psalm (7.11) or recounted his own experience to instruct him. But Solomon soon knew the force of it on his own account. "And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the LORD God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice" (one of which was to say "Ask what I shall give thee" (1 Kings 3.5)) "and had commanded him this thing, that he should not go after other gods: but he kept not that which the LORD commanded" (1 Kings 11. 9-10).

The consequence was significant, for himself and, more importantly, for the nation of which he was the king. You may read the sequel in 1 Kings 11. However, he was personally saved and restored. Consequences may still dog us and we may sin again, to our grief, but the Lord never removes that status into which we enter by faith as children of God upon repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one" (John 10. 27-30).

"Keep my commandments and live" (verse 2). It is one thing to try to keep the commandments of God to earn salvation which, as we have seen, is doomed to fail miserably. It is quite another to seek to please our heavenly Father and our Saviour by our obedience when we have been saved as an act of loving devotion. The Lord Jesus Christ said to His disciples before parting from them, "If ye love me keep my commandments" (John 14.15). He also said "This is my commandment that ye love one another as I have loved you" (John 15.12). Another of His commandments concerns eating the bread and drinking the wine at communion of which He said, "This do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22.19). He commanded His disciples to baptize those who were converted by their preaching, which is tantamount to commanding those who are converted to be baptized, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you (Matthew 28. 19-20). He also

said, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16.15). “His commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5.3).

“The apple of thine eye” (verse 2). It is elegant picture language referring to the pupil of the eye. Spurgeon writes, “The all-wise Creator has placed the eye in a well-protected position; it stands surrounded by projecting bones like Jerusalem encircled by mountains. Moreover, its great Author has surrounded it with many tunics of inward covering, besides the hedge of the eyebrows, the curtain of the eyelids, and the fence of the eyelashes”. Speaking of our heavenly Father’s relationship to His believing people, Zechariah writes (2.8), “he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye.” Moses, moved by the Holy Spirit, declares, “The Lord’s portion is his people...he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye” (Deuteronomy 32.10). So we see that the pupil of the eye is most intricate and to be guarded as something irreplaceable; irreplaceable, at least in those days. It is something most precious. Solomon might have been taught by his father, David, the words of his prayer in Psalm 17, “Keep me as the apple of the eye” – it might even have been a tender expression that was often upon his lips in Solomon’s hearing. We are bidden to keep all the Lord’s commands with tender regard, in all practical matters (fingers are mentioned) and to keep them as close as the intimate relationships of sister and relatives.

The picture language that has been painted for us now turns into a cameo in verses 6-23. Of course, they didn’t have such a thing in those days, but it is like the commencement of a video. The effect is to show us, step by step, the downward path, the beguiling path into sin. The Holy Spirit reminds us in a similar way in the latter stages of the Bible, in James 1. 14-16, “Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren.” The general principle of the downward spiral of lapsing into sin is made very clear that, whatever the sin, someone succumbs when drawn away by his/her own particular inward lust.

In Proverbs 7. 6-23, however, is a specific example. We see the motion picture of a young man looking to gratify his lusts. It is a foolish thing to do. He goes where he knows he will find opportunity. It is dark; he hopes to be hidden but, of course, he is seen. Just as the Lord sees all our doings. The temptress now appears, loud-mouthed, alluring passers by in her red-light district. She makes the poor boy feel wanted with a kiss. She makes a show of her religion, claiming that there’s nothing to be afraid of from God or from her husband who is away for a long time. Clearly she is deceitful and cunning; she makes the boy feel that he is the very one she has been looking forward to meeting. As if there had never been another like him; not even, by implication, her husband within the proper relationship of marriage. He is referred to as “the goodman of the house” not as husband. The “fill of love” which she proposes is but a solace; is

never seen by her as being more than a one-night stand. But he yields, as an ox to the slaughter. And, in the memorable words of the scripture itself, “till a dart strike through his liver; as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life” (verse 23). Everything about this night speaks of destruction, ruin, deceit and death. “Her house is the way to hell” (verse 27).

Regrettably, it is not only youths who yield to this temptation. Older ones, who should know better, in some mid-life crisis, succumb in a similar way and with a similar result except that it has to be added that it is a monumental folly for a family man to put his family at risk by such action.

“Let not thine heart decline to her ways” (verse 25). Rather, “keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (4.23). All sin is to be resisted; all flesh to be mortified in the life of a believer.

“She hath cast down many wounded” (verse 26). Wounded in conscience; ruined in character; destroyed as to reputation and sickened, perhaps, in body; this is the deceitful reward.

Proverbs 8

As we saw in Proverbs 1.20 and the verses which followed, the wisdom of Christ reaches out through the gospel to those who are astray, who are not churchgoers, who are strangers to that gospel. It is a plea to reject purposeless ways, to consider priorities and to lay hold of Christ. “For the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4.18). Christ, “the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1.24), “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2.3) makes a direct appeal to the hearts of men and women, even in Old Testament days.

Assuredly, in the conscience but more particularly in the reading of the scriptures and the preaching of the gospel, wisdom cries out to people. On the top of mountains where “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills” (Psalm 121.1) to see the grandeur of nature, “the everlasting hills” (Genesis 49.26), or as the place, also, where the false worship of false gods is rife (Jeremiah 2.20). The Saviour calls by the gospel that the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein (Isaiah 35.8) and to the judges (Psalm 82.2) and merchants at the gate (Nehemiah 13. 15-21) to do justly in all their doings and to believe in the God of all the earth Who does right (Genesis 18.25). The call goes out to all sorts and conditions of men to take heed of Christ. “Unto you, O men, I call” (8.4).

The gospel speaks of the most excellent things; but where the Saviour Himself draws a person that gospel is believed internally and that wisdom made their very own. “They are all plain to him that understandeth, and right to them that find knowledge” (8.9).

“Doth not wisdom cry?” Certainly. The Lord Jesus Christ commands concerning His gospel, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16.15). “My voice is to the sons of men” (8.4). Even the simple and the fools are not overlooked. The cry is to hear. “But they said, We will not hearken” (Jeremiah 6.17).

We are very ready to hear the siren voices of sexual excitement or the opinions of self-appointed experts with their own political or other agendas but, says, Jesus, “ye will not come to me that ye might have life” (John 5.40). Why not? He declares, “I am come in my Father’s name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?” (John 5.43-44). “All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing forward or perverse in them” (8.8). “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14.6)

“Receive my instruction, and not silver...wisdom is better than rubies” (8.10-11). “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1.11-12).

The Lord Jesus Christ is “head over all things to the church” (Ephesians 1.22) and, to that end, kings, princes and judges fulfil their respective ministries under the Lord’s direction. This same Saviour loves to guide them that ask Him with all wisdom, “I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me” (8.17). He speaks of “durable riches and righteousness” (8.18) and in the same way he holds out to his disciples the prospect, “ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15.16). “My fruit is better than gold” (8.19).

“I lead in the way of righteousness...that I may cause those that love me to inherit substance”. The substance here spoken of is within, “the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (1 Peter 3.4). This would be a good time to read again 1 Corinthians 1.17-31 and that will prepare us for the exceptional passage which begins at Proverbs 8.22.

Almost the last words which Jesus spoke to His disciples were “I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father” (John 16.28). These words so impressed John that he began his gospel along those lines. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it

not...He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name...And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1.1-5, 10-12, 14).

Now you will readily see that nearly one thousand years before, Solomon had been moved to write of the Lord Jesus Christ not dissimilar things. “The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was...when he prepared the heavens I was there...then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men” (8.22-23, 27, 30-31).

As we consider the person of Christ in creation it would be a good time to refresh ourselves with the wonder of these things by reading Job 38-42.

What a wonderful thing it is that believers in having Christ have Him as their wisdom. His wisdom extends to every precision calculation of the universe with its planetary courses – its creation (in every detail); its life and movement; its salvation by Calvary; the new creature in Him and the new heavens and the new earth. Absolutely every conceivable situation is covered and fully understood; is prepared for and dealt with by Him. “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8.28). “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain” (Psalm 76.10).

“God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4.24). Now God as Spirit has no form, though He may manifest Himself in a form. Jesus Himself took on real manhood, flesh and blood, being born of a virgin. We must understand expressions about Christ and of His Father as picture language to help us understand. God is not a father as human men may be fathers. Christ was not the next generation son. But it is helpful to us to have picture language to help us understand the care of God and the relational attributes of God within the Trinity. The Saviour Himself taught us to say “Our Father which art in heaven” (Matthew 6.9) and constantly referred to Him as Father. The scriptures refer to Christ as the only-begotten, as for example, in John 1.18, “No man hath seen God t any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him”. So here in Proverbs, on the one hand we have the expression “I was set up from everlasting.” Now, it is exceedingly difficult for a finite mind to conceive everlastingness; more especially something that never began as opposed to something that will never end where “set up” gives us a sense of a fully established being. Though to our minds it might imply subjection, it is a truly helpful description (which God authorises, as it is

scriptural). On the other hand in the expression “I was brought forth” it is probably not birth that is given to us in picture language but the showing forth, the revealing of the second person of the Godhead. Fountains, mountains and hills recognised him as existing before them, so that we read that “the wind and the sea obey him” (Mark 4.41) during His earthly ministry.

The Saviour has, from the time of the creation of the world, rejoiced in “the habitable part of the earth”. During His temptations He was, for a relatively short time, in the wilderness with the wild beasts (Mark 4.13). But His delights were (and are) particularly with the sons of men, and seeing that the Father was delighted in Him the Saviour’s delight in the sons of men is shared by the Father also. Notice that unlike the animal rights movement the Saviour puts people above the rest of creation.

The word “daily” occurs twice in this passage, at verses 30 & 34. The contrast is remarkable. On the one hand the Son experienced the Father’s daily delight in Him. On the other hand, believers may experience the Son’s daily delight in them as they watch daily to exercise His wisdom by consulting Him daily in every situation. It does not take long, if we neglect the opportunity of a daily audience with Christ (minimum), for we may continually resort unto Him (Psalm 71.3), to leave our first love (Revelation 2.4) and may fall under His displeasure inasmuch as He may say of us “I have somewhat against thee”.

Proverbs 9

It is possible that the Lord Jesus Christ fashioned His parable of the marriage of the king’s son (Matthew 22. 1-14) with its final observation, “many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22.14) on elements in this passage. The picture here seems to be of “house warming” rather than marriage, but the “calling” aspect, “let him turn in hither” (9.16), is of prime importance. “Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst...all that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out...no man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him...every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me” (John 6. 35, 37, 44-45).

“Wisdom hath builded her house (9.1). “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14.2).

1 Kings 7 tells us how Solomon built his own house, the house of the forest of Lebanon and a house for Pharaoh’s daughter. In the former are mentioned four rows of cedar pillars, and a further 45 pillars (15 in a row). A row of cedar beams is mentioned concerning these other two houses. The fact that there are seven pillars in Proverbs 9.1 suggests that this is symbolic, picture language with seven representing the number of

perfection. The church is described as “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3.15), that is the support and foundation of the truth. In the plural it is used of the apostles in Galatians 2.9. And in Revelation 3. 12 it is said, “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God”. The pillar of cloud and of fire would be towering pillars rather than supports. In the house of God the Lord has caused a perfect gospel, His completed, final atoning work to be made known, saying repeatedly (we have it twice in this chapter to give that effect, in verses 4 & 16) “whoso is simple, let him turn in hither”.

The Saviour cried in the Temple (John 7.37), “If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink”. He also declared “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6.35). In Psalm 68.11 it is written, “The Lord gave the word: great was the company of those that published it” where in the Hebrew the company is said to be female. Not that it refers to women preachers. But the church as the bride of Christ publishes the gospel; and in Proverbs 9 the wisdom of Christ is personified as a woman. The publishing of the gospel is wisdom; the receiving the gospel is the highest wisdom.

There are none so foolish as those who deny the existence of God. “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God” (Psalm 14.1; 53.1). It would be our wisdom to forsake the foolish and live. If we share their views we keep them company. There are many foolish ways and lifestyles but the most foolish of all is to be an atheist. It has the most appalling consequences in the final judgment. That there are gradations of eternal punishment is clear from the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 12. 45-48.

If we tamper with a scorner it is like baiting a wild animal and we will be savaged. Reluctantly they must be left to come to their senses if God should grant them grace to repent. “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (Matthew 7.6). However, we are to be like generous David whose response to rebuke was gratitude. “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer shall also be in their calamities” (Psalm 141.5). “And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: and blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand” (1 Samuel 25. 32-33). We are once again reminded that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” and that upon this foundation may many opportunities arise in our lives to receive and apply the wisdom which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. To possess and welcome such wisdom is to enrich our lives immeasurably. To be a scorner of God and the things which are noble and of good report is to bring down upon our own heads the full weight of God’s punishment for iniquity.

“Stolen waters are sweet...” (9.17). “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked...” (Genesis 3. 6-7). It is of the essence of temptation that, if indulged, it will seem wonderful at the time but afterwards “his mouth shall be filled with gravel” (Proverbs 20.17) and the experience savours of hell (9.18). Whereas the apparently unwelcome experience of chastening provides the reverse experience. “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12.11).

“He knoweth not that the dead are there...” A child does not understand, say, the danger of running into the road. It is for the parent to be on guard for him and for the child to be obedient. Such scriptures as these are our guardians. It is our wisdom to be obedient to them

Proverbs 10

The chapter summaries in the edition of the Authorised Version of the Holy Scriptures published by the Trinitarian Bible Society in 2012 are taken from an edition printed in 1773 by Eyre and Strahan. Headings in other editions are not dissimilar. We read, “from this chapter to the twenty-fifth are various observations of moral virtues and their contrary vices.” In other words how a believer should model his/her life and what might be expected as the consequences if not. Inasmuch as they are moral virtues they are always and everywhere relevant. It would be well for all mankind to observe them. But a believer in Christ should not fall short in this regard. “Wisdom hath builded her house” (Proverbs 9.1) and this is the wise structure of life we must erect under the guidance of the Lord Jesus Christ’s wisdom.

The New Testament epistles, as the Bible draws to its close, take up this theme again. A new believer beginning to read through the scriptures may discover these before getting to read the Book of Proverbs. Typical of the contrasts between right and wrong as presented in the New Testament we find, for example, “Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.” Again the vice and contrary virtue is apparent:- “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Ephesians 4. 28-29).

It is difficult to know how best to comment. Some writers gather the various topics under headings, but that is to minimise the force of scriptural repetition. Though it

may be a slower process, we (the writer and the reader) will, by the same wisdom, savour each instruction.

10.1. A young lad should seek to learn wisdom in his dealings from his earliest days under the instruction of mother and father. Both parents will take pleasure in his attainments or be grieved if he fails. However, it is particularly characteristic of the father to rejoice to see the next generation following the principles he has espoused. It is the part of the mother, especially, to feel the ingratitude of a constantly wayward boy, who rejects the efforts to lead him into paths of wisdom.

10.2. The next instruction is phrased with the vice first and the virtue last. This is not quite so usual but is still a frequent occurrence. It is a common experience that mankind would pay anything to be made better from a life-threatening sickness. Righteousness and wickedness are portrayed under the illustration of a treasure chest, of accumulated wealth. Wickedness has no purchasing power when it comes to attaining a useful life; righteousness, which at its minimal level may signify “right living” avoids those evil ways which may cause early death, as we have seen, for example, in Proverbs 7.27; 8.36.

However, in the scriptures, righteousness may refer to two other things. In the sense of “right living” it becomes a moral darkness, a “moral night” as the hymnwriter says, if it makes us proud and leads to self-righteousness. But in any sense moral righteousness, at its best, is best described in Isaiah thus:- “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isaiah 64.6) where, for emphasis, all our righteousness is evaluated separately as the individual acts, righteousnesses, which spring from a righteous attitude whether it be a proud stance, self-righteous, or not. We are like urchins. Our moral deeds at their very best do not cover us and are indeed stained. They cannot save us.

And so, the other scriptural usage of “righteousness” is to “declare his righteousness (that is, Christ’s) for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Romans 3. 25-26). This is called the “righteousness of faith” (Romans 4.13). The gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ presents Him as the only perfect man, and therefore the only man acceptable to a perfectly holy and righteous God. His death has provided a perfect atonement for sinners who put all their trust in the Saviour’s perfections and not their own, His righteousness (that is, perfection) being attributed to all who by repentance and faith become members of a new race, no longer Adam’s but Christ’s. “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature (creation): old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ...” (2 Corinthians 5. 17-18).

When a person is saved, he no longer thinks that any good deeds he thought he had could earn him salvation. Rather, he certainly redoubles his efforts to do that which is good to the glory of the Saviour, Whose he is and Whom he represents, but out of love to please Him; not to earn anything. In this sense a Christian's deeds may be described as righteousness; as in Romans 6.13 where it is written, "yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members (hands, feet, tongue) as instruments of righteousness unto God."

10.3. So that when we come to this verse we may think of it at its lower level as those who live a "good" life. But it is always best to understand the word "righteousness" in its higher sense whenever we come across it in the scriptures; at least to have an eye on the higher meaning in every case, that is, that it refers most supremely to the saved believer. In this example, we see that for a believer to draw the meat from this verse would be to understand that the Lord will always feed the soul, sustain the soul of a believer, even in the most adverse circumstances (as in Psalm 23. 1,5) while, at the end when it really matters, the unbeliever will be stripped of the accomplishments that he imagined he had achieved. It would be good at this point to read Psalm 73, where the believer is troubled that all seems to be going well for the unbeliever and with difficulty for the believer, "I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked...they are not in trouble as other men..." (Psalm 73.3ff). This is not true, but can be our perception at times. Then comes the realisation of the truth of the matter, Psalm 73.17ff "then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. How they are brought into desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors..."

10.4. Careful preparation, careful study and careful delivery of the end product in any profession or walk of life, even while at school or learning a trade, is the sure way to achievement. The language here is of an ongoing lifestyle – he "becometh poor" or "maketh rich" suggesting a need constantly to monitor one's work ethic.

10.5. There is a time to push home an advantage. As Shakespeare writes, "there is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries." Drug or alcohol-induced laziness, or simply a natural lassitude of nature at any time, is shameful; but when there is life-changing, life-enhancing opportunity it is at its most reprehensible. Such opportunities may be lost forever.

10.6. "Blessings" and "head" are contrasted with "violence" and "mouth." The mouth will be prevented from utterance violently, if need be as with a punch (an illustration of the vigour with which restraint will be enforced), where justice prevails. Free speech and a free press may be admirable, but only if used for just causes. Men will praise us if we do well to ourselves (Psalm 49.18) but it is our heavenly Father's approval or

disapproval that is spoken of, though that disapproval may be revealed by providential events or administered by second causes, that is by people in a position to do so.

10.7. There is also a double contrast here, in these beautifully constructed verses. “Memory” and “just” and “name” and “wicked.” It is wonderful to recall the Man Christ Jesus; to thank the Lord also for scripture writers, hymn writers, commentary writers and those whose examples have inspired us. We hardly ever have need to experience rotting vegetation, itself more pleasant than rotting flesh. So we scarcely ever think of the wicked of time past, except perhaps in history studies and certainly not with affectionate memories. Their souls are left with God Himself, for to Him belong the issues from death, Psalm 68.20.

10.8. Sometimes when we rebuke children they struggle and do not want to be told. To be like that as a grown up is folly. It is wise to review and learn from our mistakes, indeed to have regular times of reviewing our lives. “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head” (Psalm 141.5). Someone once described those who spend too much time tweeting and on Facebook as the twittering classes. That is the meaning of “prating.” Having many words which gush out without, for the most part, anything of significance to say. Once again it is good to be reminded of Ephesians 4.29 “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.”

10.9 Walking and running are elegant pictures of making our way through life, and the Bible often refers them to the Christian life. Life is a long distance matter – walking is very apt to the pacing of ourselves. But spurts are sometimes necessary, as in preparations for examinations and in many other ways, so that sprinting is apt. To walk uprightly of course is a picture of walking without stooping, to walk erect. But the picture illustrates a healthy stance, a journey through life in accordance with the laws of the Lord. Likewise, a person cannot hide for long the crooked interests of his heart. Do read again Isaiah 40.31.

10.10. Here is a double repetition so that we may revise. It would be good to read again the text of, and the comment on, Proverbs 6.13. One who winks gives us to understand that what is being said is not to be taken seriously, when it should be; it may privately signal a corroboration in mocking the speaker. Then, once again, we are to consider the one who goes on and on, not knowing what he is talking about. We should give but little heed to such, seeing it is of such little significance and is going to lead to final collapse if persisted in..

10.11. Once again we are referred to that part of verse 6 which said, “violence covereth the mouth of the wicked.” But the contrast is different. There it was “memory” and “mouth”; here it is like for like, “mouth” and “mouth.” A righteous man’s mouth is like

an open well, full of life refreshing ideas. The wicked man's mouth should be like a well stopped up for the poisonous nature of its provision.

10.12. There are those who do nothing but cause trouble wherever they come, where there was none. We are used to meeting such. But the bitterness of hatred over one perceived or actual wrong sustained may cause someone who never was like that to become so for the remainder of life, to their own and others' great detriment. This is a theme which occurs from time to time in the Bible. James, for example, illustrates each in James 4.1 and 5.20. "From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?" "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins."

10.13. We speak of making a rod for our own back. The original picture was of being beaten on the bare back for some serious misdemeanour. So the disobedient, perhaps not so much wilfully as simply being unwilling to learn, makes life hard and painful for himself. A child may have to do something twice or even three times who didn't want to do something at all, simply because of unwillingness to focus. It is his own time, when he would rather be doing other things that he is wasting. Understanding leads to wisdom which in turn means that we have something to say in vital situations which can benefit others.

10.14. Once again the emphasis is on the mouth of the foolish. He who has nothing of value to say often has too much to say. The wise man lays up, collects, amasses and stores in his mind sensible and valuable things. He speaks but rarely, but will produce these acquirements to benefit others if and when required. The foolish man talks anyway and sometimes brings upon himself his own demise.

10.15. When a man labours hard at his work for the welfare of his family and, maybe, business that wealth will purchase for him all he needs even when times are hard and prices inflated. At a higher level his spiritual acquirements are his highest gain and will be his fortress against temptation and doubt. Whether the one or the other, the foolish man has not resources in the difficult day. He wasted his opportunity and came to poverty and when he needed to draw upon reserves in difficult times, he had none.

10.16. Later scriptures comment admirably upon this verse. The Lord Jesus Christ in John 6.27 says, "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life which the Son of man shall give unto you." "What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death" (Romans 6.21).

10.17. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14.6) said the Lord Jesus Christ. The way is the road, the direction, the route which leads to life. To be obedient to the Lord

Jesus Christ combines what is said here in Proverbs with what the Saviour says in the gospels. Again we are reminded that to refuse to obey will cause us to go astray, to wander in unprofitable views, doctrines and habits.

10.18. Two foolish things are here laid bare, for human nature is such that we may well find ourselves trying these things on. If not, good; but it is a real likelihood for some. Tennyson was aware that it is a frequent occurrence and wrote, "Forgive! How many will say forgive, and find a sort of absolution in the sound to hate a little longer." People also very easily go over the top when they are emotional and say things about one another that cannot be substantiated and simply are not true, but cause much hurt.

10.19. A preacher or teacher has to be careful. Any sort of adviser or even a doctor has to weigh words carefully, which we don't always appreciate; but it is necessary. As for tweeters...! Restraint, especially in words, especially when aroused or opposed is wisdom.

10.20. As with "righteous," which we considered earlier, so with "just". It has a lower meaning, that of being right and fair. But also a higher meaning of the one who is "justified" by faith in Christ Jesus. We find the former sense in Romans 3.26 "that he (that is, God) might be just, and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus" and the second in Habakkuk 2.4 (and quoted Galatians 3.11; Hebrews 10.38) "the just shall live by his faith." A fair-minded man may help us enormously by simply being honest. But a justified man may be the means of our eternal salvation and of building us up in our most holy faith by words of life, a much more noble end. These are likened not simply to silver, but choice silver. The words are selected to best effect, and the effect is a choice outcome. But in the case of wicked man, even his very emotions, his heart, where you would expect there to be some spark, has grown withered and loveless.

10.21. Again, whether on a lower or a spiritual level, a righteous man may be of great help. But a fool who "obeys not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thessalonians 1.9).

10.22. This is one of the more famous proverbs. The blessing of God speaks of His favour through which He bestows whatever good thing He pleases upon His children. "In his favour is life" (Psalm 30.5). Though in the natural order of things "man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward" and "man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble" (Job 5.7;14.1), the blessing of the Lord gives inward love, joy, peace and many other things. This is no promise of carnal security, for believers have to live in the world without being of it, nor does it give any place for the health and wealth, the prosperity "gospel," but as we have seen in Proverbs 4.18 is the inward strength which, being constantly renewed and enriched, causes the path of the just to be as a shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

10.23. A fool thinks it fun to ridicule, scorn and undermine the real achievements and efforts of the well-intentioned. It is so much easier than the real effort of solid attainment; but that which is harder and slower to come by, requiring much effort and concentration, is of lasting value and much more sensible to make our life's work.

10.24. A desire may be prayed for whereas fear ravages the heart. We are told in 1 John 4.18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." And in 1 John 5. 15-15, "...this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him." The unrepentant wicked one has good cause to be afraid. When the "desire of all nations shall come" (Haggai 2.7) then shall the desire of the righteous be finally fulfilled and we shall find that, along the way, all desires which ministered to the coming of His kingdom have been granted also.

10.25. Whirlwinds, hurricanes, tsunamis and storms wreak havoc but are relatively soon over, though they leave sorrow and much clearing up as their aftermath. Though they caused much hurt and damage the wicked pass away. It would be good once again to read Psalm 73. 17-20 at this point. The church is made up of individual believers but collectively it is said of the church of the living God that it is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3.15).

10.26. It is a real problem to have to allot a lazy or indifferent person a task in a team effort. It will cause frustration and failure. It is described as setting the teeth on edge in the expression "vinegar to the teeth" and it speaks of the sense of everything being out of joint, to use another picture. Just a sense of nothing working right or harmoniously. "Smoke to the eyes" speaks of a real, smarting hindrance preventing immediate progress and causing much delay.

10.27. We have had cause to consider "the fear of the Lord" in Proverbs 1.7 and other associated scriptures. Here we are told that it "prolongeth days" which, once again, may be considered at two levels. Long life and eternal life. The first commandment with promise (Ephesians 6.2) is alluded to by Paul, saying, "Honour thy father and thy mother...that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest live long upon the earth." The first commandment with promise is actually the fifth commandment and reads at Exodus 20.12, "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee." So we see there a promise of long life, conditional upon obedience, to those who fear the Lord. But we read in John 3.16 that, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Here, the prolonging of days has quite a different perspective, that of eternity. A wicked man never knows how long he might have lived had his ways been different.

10.28. Hope and expectation are meant to be exciting things. Nothing good is to be expected for those who die in their sins. They shall be “punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 1.9). The ultimate gladness of a believer is described in 2 Corinthians 4.17 as an “exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

10.29. We considered “way” in verse 17. In Psalm 37.23 we read, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way.” We shall find strength in doing whatever the Lord has appointed for our individual lives and in doing so according to the commandments of His word. By contrast, the destruction just mentioned above is the reward of the wickedness of unbelief; indeed of all wickedness not repented of.

10.30. The Lord Jesus Christ opens His sermon on the mount (which is his definitive statement at the beginning of his ministry of the principles and values of His kingdom and what He would expect from those who follow Him and become citizens of His kingdom) with the Beatitudes. The third one reads, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” Meekness is not always rewarded as it should be. But the new heavens and the new earth will be peopled by those who were meek after the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. In that ultimate sense they shall never be removed. Not so for the wicked. You see how repeatedly the Lord appeals to the wicked to turn from their wicked ways by outlining for them what will be the end of their chosen way if they continue in it.

10.31. Once again we are reminded about our speech. “Froward,” you will recall, is the opposite of “towards” and speaks of that person’s words who has turned from God. There is no intention of literally cutting out the tongue. The intent of his words shall be brought to nothing and continuing opportunity to speak perverse things will be denied. Wise words will have many opportunities to flourish.

10.32. The unacceptable speech of the wicked knows no bounds unless silence is enforced upon them. They continue to advise unbelief, immorality and all manner of vain things, seeking to wield a pernicious influence. It is a mark of wisdom to know when, how and what to speak to have the greatest salutary effect. Let us guard our speech and to that end read once again James 3. 1-13.

Proverbs 11

11.1. A modern generation is not so familiar with balances in shops except perhaps in greengroceries. We are more likely to be familiar with them from the school chemistry lab. If one of the weights put on the balance is incorrect in favour of the businessman, then the customer is always going to be defrauded. This verse, then, speaks of just business dealings, and by extension, trustworthy dealings in all things. But what

especially is revealed here is the intimate concern, down to very detail, that the Lord takes in the affairs of mankind.

11.2. Once again the best commentary on this verse is one of the Saviour's beatitudes. "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5.5). This is the opposite of what the world values. A proud bearing is esteemed as carrying authority. It was not so with Christ nor should it be so with His followers. We shall be reminded of this matter again in the course of this book. Quite the contrary pride is a badge of shame. Christ bestows His wisdom upon the lowly, as you would expect from the One described by the prophet Zechariah (9.9):-"behold thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass..." where "lowly" is replaced by its synonym "meek" when quoted in Matthew 21.5.

11.3. Integrity, long practised, is a backdrop to lead us to correct decisions but the attitude of perversity in any issue will finally bring down the one who, by definition, persistently engages with the opposite of what is good.

11.4. "The day of wrath" refers to any day on which the anger of God is revealed, but most especially puts us in mind of the day of judgment. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" says Paul in Romans 1.18, whether the wrath of the Day of Judgment is anticipated by judgments against them on earth or not.

11.5. Again the word "perfect" also has two meanings; a lower, where it simply means "complete," or a higher where absolute perfection is intended. It is best always to look for the higher meaning, but at the same time to bear in mind the lower. Scripture records that, "They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him" (Psalm 49. 6-7). Only in the higher sense of the righteousness which is by faith can it truly be said that "righteousness delivereth from death."

11.6. The first part of this proverb echoes the first part of the previous verse, with two differences; firstly that it is plural, which is stylistic and secondly that it speaks of the conclusion of the direction mentioned in the previous verse, namely ultimate deliverance or a, at a lower level, a successful outcome of the matter in hand. The wicked being ensnared, according to the former proverb, are now captured, caught red-handed, with no prospect of appeal.

11.7. There is no hope of the bliss of heaven for a wicked man after death, and this surely is an incentive to cease from sin. Whatever he hoped, whether rest from life's labours or the rewards of heaven, will all be denied.

11.8. On the other hand the times of trouble of the righteous (bear in mind the lower and higher levels of usage of this word) come to an end but the wicked man, who has perhaps been spared overmuch trouble before, will then enter into his full quota of it.

11.9. It is terrible when a person's reputation is slanderously or libellously destroyed without cause and it is an honourable thing to attempt to clear one's name. However, never mind the misconceptions of men, we will probably experience less hurt by leaving it in the hands of our heavenly Father than pursuing matters through the courts. It reminds us also that if we judge another prematurely we may be wrong in point of fact and add to the hurt. However, the courts are there to establish facts, and facts, when proved, will discover such a man to be not guilty of the things alleged.

11.10. Political correctness, as we say, often leads to nonsensical situations, not dissimilar to Dickens' "the law is an ass." When truth and commonsense prevail, guided by the wisdom of the fathers of a city or nation, then the peace and happiness over which people rejoice is established. When unreasonable opposition is overthrown with their private agendas of wickedness there are shouts of gladness.

11.11. The first part of this proverb parallels the last, but the second describes the opposite conclusion. What happens when the wicked triumph instead of perishing is the very destruction of that city or nation. It may be a good thing while there is yet time to support the work of organisations like the Christian Institute, that blessing upon this nation might yet win the day.

11.12-13. Verses 12 and 13 belong together, with the sense of the earlier verse being made clear by the later. It is by his unwise, hurtful observations that a person is seen to hold his neighbour in contempt, whereas a wise person says nothing where there is no need of any comment. Telling tales was one of the things we probably first learned about at school; and a person who tells a secret that he was pledged to keep as a condition of receiving the information in the first place, is guilty of a shameful offence – it causes shame to both parties, as likely as not. Confidences are to be faithfully observed as part of true Christian witness.

11.14. This is another famous proverb, one which members of any jury, committee, council, cabinet or advisory board should esteem highly. "In the multitude of counsellors there is safety." One view and then another should be put forward. And then the matter looked at from every possible angle before a decision is reached. Safe guidance may then be the conclusion of such lengthy consideration; but the time spent is worth it if the verdict or decision is safe for posterity. If no one is on hand to act as a sounding board or give positive direction then, because we are fallen creatures, we are likely in a time of crisis, when emotions are fully engaged, to rush into a rash decision or conclusion.

The three committees, meeting at Cambridge, Oxford and Westminster who translated the Authorised Version, completed in 1611, are a most effective example of the proverb “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.” They sent the translations to each other for review; and even read their translation out aloud to one another to ensure that the flow of the language and the cadences and rhythms of the chosen words should have maximum impact in public as well as private reading. Truly a multitude of counsellors ensured a safe translation.

11.15. Once again the Holy Spirit of the Lord repeats earlier teaching so that it might be embedded in our consciousness by constant reminders. It would be worth reading Proverbs 6.1-5 again with the comments. It is a rule of thumb never to be involved, but, after careful consideration, an exception might be made for friends. We see how gullible people are when they are taken in by doorstep or telephone frauds. Let us seek the Holy Spirit’s help to warn us off that which would be so thoroughly unwise.

11.16. This is a beautifully rounded proverb, worth remembering by heart. While a man may have honour and a woman earn riches the manner of expression emphasises that which is a great adornment in each case. The words “grace” and, as here “gracious”, (like words which we have considered before) have a lower and a higher meaning. It may simply mean “charming” or it may mean full of the grace of the Holy Spirit of Christ as a saved person. The word that is common to both parts of the proverb is “retain.” Grace and strength (moral and spiritual as well as physical) enable us to keep a consistent hold on our deportment as well as our possessions.

11.17. Certain accomplishments give a sense of inner satisfaction and this is one of the enrichments of the soul. The exercise of mercy is one of these things that are right in and of themselves and therefore find an echo of rightness within. A merciful man is more likely to be on the receiving end of mercy himself, either because his exercise of mercy is widely known and therefore returned into his own bosom by those who have a sense of justice, or because the Lord Himself exercises a mercy to him in regard to the forgiveness of his sins. The cruel have no inner satisfaction but, on the contrary, a restlessness and a griping conscience within; and is likely to have cruelty recompensed to him by those who, rightly or wrongly, take it upon themselves to avenge his cruelty as opportunity presents.

11.18. Deceit of one kind or another is the weapon of the wicked and deceitfulness is his, perhaps invisible, trademark. It is of the essence of deceit that it is difficult to detect. It is delightful picture language that righteousness is sown; that it will grow and bear fruit is the signification. As surely as seeds grow and bloom so will righteousness reap its full harvest. There is also in the use of this picture language more than the suggestion that righteousness is the crop of choice; deliberately sown in order that there might be a harvest of it and that one might live to enjoy it.

11.19. The pursuit of evil results in death. We are going to come across this more than once before we finish in Proverbs. For example, there is Proverbs 14.12 “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death”, repeated in Proverbs 16.15. Concerning this theme, with its contrast of the ways which respectively lead to life or death, the Lord Jesus Christ says, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7. 13-14).

11.20. To abominate is to loathe. The one who turns his back on the Lord God, despising His goodness in his heart, is the just recipient of His displeasure. It does us good to think of the pro-active delight which the Lord takes in the ways of those who seek to please Him.

11.21. The joining of hands signifies the ratifying of an agreement to act jointly, and as it is the wicked who are involved, so it will be the joint working of iniquity. Isaiah 7.2, 6-7 furnishes an example:- “It was told the house of David, saying, Syria is confederate with Ephraim...saying, Let us go up against Judah and vex it, and let us make a breach therein...Thus saith the Lord GOD, It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass.” We read in the New Testament, “And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves” (Luke 23.12). Pilate thought he could fob off on to Herod the decision as to what to do with Jesus; Herod had been desirous of meeting Him for a long time. It was a seemingly mutually helpful situation. Of course, it achieved nothing. In the former example Judah was delivered and in the latter the Lord Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and Herod died a terrible death shortly after (Acts 12.23).

11.22. A pig does not appreciate the value to man of a golden jewel which it has rooted up and the two do not sit comfortably together, so to speak. Likewise it would be most fitting for a beautiful woman to have intelligence and good taste to match, but incongruous for such to lack these virtues. Maybe the Lord Jesus Christ was alluding to this very verse in the sermon on the mount when He said, “Give not that which is holy to the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (Matthew 7.6).

11.23. The innermost aspiration of a believer, despite very real failings, is to see the altogether lovely One and be made like Him. On a lesser level the words of Philippians 4.8 are apposite:- “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things...and the God of peace shall be with you.” All that the wicked who set these things at nought can expect is God’s wrath.

11.24. This is another very famous proverb. The wise man scatters his seed and reaps a harvest. The miser hoards but has no advantage by his riches. As we shall also see in Proverbs 20.4, the lazy man forbears and suffers, “The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing.” Ecclesiastes 11.1,4 show us a similar contrast. “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days...He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.” You might think that scattering loses; and hoarding preserves. But in ordinary things and in spiritual things the reverse is a true principle. Again, the Lord Jesus Christ reminds His followers, “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again” (Luke 6.38) alluding, in all probability, to this and the following proverb.

11.25. “Liberal” here means one who gives freely, and as Jesus says, will be recompensed in kind.

11.26. Joseph was moved by the Lord to store the harvests in barns prior to the seven years of famine and then to make them available in the lean years. But to fail to make food available, most likely by pricing it out of the reach of the poor and starving, when it is actually available, is to court hatred. For life and death are the issues here and to be denied sustenance is to be denied life.

11.27. The theme of seeking is a very rich one in the scriptures. For example, Isaiah 55.6 “Seek ye the LORD, while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” And, (Matthew 7.7-8) “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” And, “If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?” (Matthew 18.12). Diligence in seeking, whether in pursuing a career or opportunity, will lead to results under the Lord’s guidance, to the place and position of His appointing. The one who seeks mischief does not have far or long to look. It comes to him. If we do not diligently seek the good, we may find ourselves drifting into temptation for it is not possible to be neutral in these things, as David in the matter of Bathsheba.

11.28. “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 9.23-24). Here is a specific command not to trust in riches,

but in the living God. A branch draws its sap from the trunk and the trunk from the roots of a tree. So we draw our goodness and flourish by being in Christ. “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing” (John 15.5).

11.29. Civil war is particularly devastating. As the Lord Jesus Christ observed (Luke 11.17-18). “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?” Trouble in a home, a church or a nation lays it low. Everything will be blown away. And, if any good things that once were flourishing are left, they will be windswept. The foolish person who initiated such folly in his own house shall become a mere servant in someone else’s; someone who was too wise to allow his own house to come to ruin.

11.30. “He that winneth souls is wise.” To win a soul to the Lord Jesus Christ is wise. To turn an erring brother or sister from the error of their ways is wise. “Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (James 5.20).”They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12.3). Notice that the turning of many to righteousness is echoed by Jesus’ words, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 14.5,16).

11.31. When we read, for example, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5.5) we can easily understand that the meek will inherit the new heavens and the new earth. But what about in this life? Jesus was meek and was put to death. It is clear, however, that He has inherited a faithful people who in the here and now exercise faith on the earth. This proverb puts down a guideline that there will be sufficient of a recompense to encourage us to continue in the faith while here, pending the ultimate everlasting recompense of eternal glory. Parallel to that, the sinner will reap everlasting destruction hereafter, but even now will experience the beginnings of such a recompense.

Proverbs 12

12.1. We have had cause to consider 1 Corinthians 1.30, that the Lord Jesus Christ is appointed to be the believer’s wisdom by God. Now the Holy Spirit of Christ draws our attention to the scriptures, and when we sit down to read them we may consciously sit down to be personally tutored and that should make us ready learners. Our hearts will be drawn to love our Father’s way more than our own way; His revealed will more than the world’s teaching. In this connection do read again at this juncture 1 Corinthians 1.

17-31. “Brutish” is a telling word. Only mankind has a soul, and whenever we act as if we had no soul, without our immortal soul’s best interests at heart, then we shall descend to the level of the soulless beasts, and soon act in a beastly way, and show a brutish, insensitive spirit.

12.2. “Favour” is by and large a synonym of “grace.” When saved David writes on our behalf, moved by the Holy Spirit, “LORD, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to stand strong” he is contrasting that with the time when “in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved.” It had been a liberating experience to rediscover that “in his favour is life” (Psalm 30. 5-7). He speaks as a saved man. Good works do not earn the reward of salvation but are rather done in order to please the Saviour who has already saved His people. If we are saved by grace, “then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (Romans 11.6). However, those who obey God’s commandments out of respect will be rewarded, at a lower level, with the reward of obedience, that feelgood factor with which we are all so familiar. So we may read this verse, like so many others, at two levels - of saving grace (the grace of faith), or the “grace” of obedience. But it would be a mistake to think that favour is ever earned.

Nought forseen Thy love excited,
Faith, or good desires in me;
But because Thy grace delighted
To be sovereign and free.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the second part of the verse is that condemnation is declared to be an opposite of favour. Condemnation is deserved; grace is unmerited.

12.3. Gardeners speak about a plant being established, by which they mean taking root. Animals may root out a plant or a gardener dig one out in error. The Lord will so watch over His people that nothing shall destroy their salvation. But the wicked ways of a wicked man shall have no lasting worth.

12.4. It might be good to anticipate by reading at this point Proverbs 31. 10-31, especially 31. 11-12. It is a wonderful thing to meditate that the Lord’s people, the bride of Christ, are to act in such a way as be a crowning glory to our Saviour. All the best attributes of marriage are fulfilled in the marriage of the Lamb and His bride; indeed marriage is designed to set forth the relationship between the Saviour and His people. That is why the Lord “hateth putting away” (Malachi 2.16) for it severs the most significant thing marriage was designed to illustrate. Just how deep marital infidelity penetrates, on either side, is aptly described as “rottenness in his bones.”

12.5. Deceit and deceitfulness are the great weapons of the devil. The Lord Jesus Christ spoke of the unbelieving Jews of His own day, “Ye are of your father the devil, and the

lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it” (John 8.44). The scriptures will keep us from all false ways. If we will not read and obey the Bible, the fallen nature is going to fall prey to the vain imaginations and all manner of dupes of the devil. The working of Satan is, “with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2. 9-10).

Sometimes the word “right” means “righteous” and again, as we have so often seen, may be interpreted at two levels, For example in Psalm 45.6 we read, “the sceptre of thy kingdom is a right sceptre” and where this verse is quoted in Hebrews 1.8 it is translated, “a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom” where the Holy Spirit clearly interprets “right” and “righteousness” as synonyms here. Now if a thing is righteous, as God sees righteousness, it has to be right; and if a thing is morally and spiritually right by God’s standards it may be said to be righteous. Things that are established by God, though they have no moral significance, may be said to be right. It is right, that is correct, that two and two makes four. Sometimes we have to have an eye, once again, on both meanings. When we read Psalm 33.4 it is well to have both meanings in the forefront of our minds, “The word of the LORD is right; and all his works are done in truth.” The word of the LORD is certainly correct; it is also designed to impart spiritual life, and therefore is instinct with righteousness. “The word of the LORD is right” is emblazoned over the pulpit at West Woolwich Baptist Church.

12.6. We noticed in Proverbs 1.10-11,18 that “if sinners entice thee, consent thou not”, entice, that is, in order to lay wait for blood, to murder or spill blood in robbery and that wisdom pleads with us not to mix with such a crowd and wisely says that it is their own blood, their own conscience, their own immortal souls that are being ruined thereby. It is a big deal to embark on that way. In this verse there are several scenarios. Wicked men advise a course of murder but a word from an upright person warns the target, as in Acts 23. 16-21. Wicked men advise a course of murder in a cabinet meeting, say, but good men speak to the contrary and win the day, possibly the outcome in Psalm 120.7. Wicked men desire to shed blood but good men prevent it, thereby saving the wicked from fulfilling Proverbs 1.18 against themselves.

12.7. It may be that the Lord had this verse in mind when He concluded the sermon on the mount with the comparison between a wise man who built his house upon a rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand, where the lesson is that His own teaching is a rock foundation and man’s teaching but sand, no base on which to build worthwhile, let alone eternal, foundations for living.

12.8. To be perverse is to hold persistently, as a settled way of thinking or of life, to the opposite of truth. The definition of “perverse” is “distorted” or “twisted” as Kipling writes of enduring the truth we’ve spoken

“twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools.”

Jesus described His generation as perverse (Luke 9.41) and Paul writes that believers have need of being “blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2.15) and speaks of the “perverse disputing of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness” (1 Timothy 6.5). When times are right, and certainly in the Day of Judgment, a man shall be commended according to his wisdom. But they are dismal days when perversity domineers.

12.9. There are still a few who employ servants but for most this is not a current scenario. We can readily understand the point, however. Or, if it helps, we may speak of a firm with many employees being better off than the entrepreneur who cannot make a go of it sufficiently to employ anyone, and whose savings ploughed into the firm are not sufficient to stave off bankruptcy. It is a false sense of self-esteem to be without food and yet parade our independence. Ultimately, it is about false priorities.

12.10. It is a shame that the expression “tender mercies” has come over into English usage in the bad sense, as here, when it is so often used in a good sense. A quick look at a concordance reveals 10 occasions in the Psalms alone when it is used in a wonderful sense. Two examples suffice. Pss.103.4 and 145.9. “Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies.” “The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.” Here the expression is ironic. In Genesis 24.32 Abraham’s servant saw to the camels before anything else. Whether we are in charge of people or animals it should be in our heart to put their welfare before our own. A cruel man is so far hardened that he may think he is being kind and thoughtful when he is really being most selfish and thoughtless.

12.11. The basic meaning of “vain” is “empty.” Those who waste their time and resources spending it in revelry or pointless language or activity rather than working is unlikely to see where it leads – to poverty and hunger. Our daily work provides our food and this should be our first priority after seeking first the “kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6.33).

12.12. The net is the stock in trade of the fisherman and the root or seed the basic requirement of the farmer-cultivator. The picture is that the wicked desire easy money from evil enterprises with a quick profit whereas the good man waiteth patiently (James 5.7) for the natural provision of the resources of his own fields on which he hath expended genuine labour.

12.13. If the previous two proverbs highlighted working the next two highlight speaking. The just (or justified) man speaking honestly shall be proved correct in court or in any other just circumstance, but the man who lies or slanders shall be proved to be maliciously in error.

12.14. Satisfaction and recompence. It is, as we say, “pay-back” time. The truthful dealing of his words and the genuine labour of his hands shall cause his toil to fetch a good price and his speech to be trusted and valued.

12.15. The expression “right in his own eyes” has also come over into the English language and has the force that the only person who can’t see that he is wrong is the person himself. Taking advice is good advice.

12.16. How many drunken men pick fights for nothing. “Presently” means “immediately,” “in the present time.” A wise man, so far from yielding to an immediate, unconsidered reaction is careful to exercise discretion. Joseph, the husband of Mary, is an example of such a prudent man. The attitude of Joseph is beautifully put in Matthew 1.19-20, “Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.” There was no shame to Mary, but Joseph’s discretion led to a happy outcome for “while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph...fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.” Joseph proved himself to be a prudent man and we may learn that the Lord will lead where rashness and quick temper is avoided and thoughtfulness and prayer prevail.

12.17. Jesus said “I am the way, the truth and the life” and none exemplified righteousness better than He. He was, however, the butt of false witnesses as in Mark 14.56-59.

12.18. Barbed speech which hurts and destroys confidence and reputation is characteristic of some. But the encouragement and help of a gracious and wise person strengthens.

12.19. Once a person is convicted of lying it is never possible to be certain again if he can be trusted. It was but a brief moment when his word was believed with confidence. Truth and genuineness, in words and other matters, are a lifelong currency. Indeed, truth stands for ever true.

12.20. As with the false prophets with whom Jeremiah frequently contended (Jeremiah 14.10-16; 23.14-32; 28.1-17) they had a secret agenda to deceive. By and large that agenda was their own self-interest and standing at the court. Jeremiah suffered much heartache but “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30.5).

12.21. "There shall no evil happen to the just." The scripture corroborates this. "The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil" (Psalm 121.7). "Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee" (Psalm 91. 9-10). Believers are in the world but not of it. They certainly partake of the evils which are in the world. It is the assessment of these evils that a Christian must understand. In Luke 21.16,18 the very same disciples are told, "some of you they shall cause to be put to death...but there shall not an hair of your head perish." To much the same purpose are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 12.4-5. "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him." We shall all die and must all from time to time suffer the precursors of death even if, at that time, they do not lead to our death then. Death is certainly the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15.26). The Lord Jesus Christ taught believers that "in the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16.33). Whatever evil happens to the justified person shall be triumphed over here sometimes, or in the hereafter. The wicked will meet inconvenience after inconvenience, downturn after downturn, disaster after disaster. All things will not work together for good to such.

12.22. Lies are the province of the "father of lies" (John 8.44), the devil, and consequently hated by the Lord. But the delight of the Lord is with the excellent (Psalm 16.3), those who deal truly. "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again" (Luke 6 36-38). That men should so act in the face of true and generous dealing is the prompting of our heavenly Father's delight.

12.23. Even the Romans understood that the art of art is in concealing art. A wise man, guided by Christ our wisdom, will know when to keep quiet even about complex issues, perhaps especially when matters are not straightforward and the evaluation of accumulated knowledge not easy. Fools speak the first things that come into their head on any issue, significant or not.

12.24. Responsibility, to a greater or lesser extent, is given to the one who applies himself. The one who has never done homework but spent every moment in his pastime and pleasure, will, if employable at all, always be among the employees and never among the employers. A Christian young person should, with this in mind, give himself to his/her studies and seek the Lord's help in them.

12.25. When a person has a heavy heart, that someone should stop to give a kind word is not only encouraging, but the good it does may be far beyond the time it took or the

words themselves. The Holy Spirit will assist a believer to be alert to such initiatives. Job felt it keenly in his deprivation and exclaimed that “to him that is afflicted pity should be showed from his friend” (Job 6.14).

12.26. The wicked sets out to deceive the good. Satan sets out to deceive the believer. “False Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall show signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect” (Mark 13.22).

12.27. If it were not such a serious matter, this is quite a humorous proverb. A man is not too lazy to hunt, but much too lazy to skin and cook what he has captured. Following up our acquirements, pressing home advantages is what this proverb is about. Laziness shows itself in all sorts of ways. For example, with Esau in Genesis, there, for one morsel of meat he disclaimed his birthright (Hebrews 12.16) showing how little he valued it. Genesis 25.34 says that he despised it and what an affront (a profanity) it was in the sight of God. A wise man, a businessman, a trader, a shopkeeper appreciates the value of his property and his stock.

12.28. This verse, in effect, sums up the chapter. On the one hand the way which leads to death; on the other, the way which leads to life, as we have already seen in our earlier studies.

Proverbs 13

13.1. A father may be able to advise his son not only in childhood, but in youth, young manhood and even in the maturest of years. If the son listened when a child, it is likely that such a relationship will have been established that will welcome advice at all times which a father would willingly continue to give. That could only be a good thing. Sometimes a son does not welcome advice immediately, but upon reflection, with calmer emotions, sees the wisdom of it. “Son, go work today in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went” (Matthew 21. 28-29). A scorner heeds no one, and mocks even well-meaning efforts to reform him.

13.2. This is a stunning illustration from the act of eating. What someone digests will be beneficial and flavoursome because his kind words will have prompted generosity. But the stomach of a transgressor will be fed violence. The words of Galatians 6.7 are a variation upon this theme, “whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

13.3. This verse completes the couplet, the subject being disciplined speech, once again. This is such an important discipline, that a believer should be circumspect with words. If we are careful with words it shows that we are careful also with our thoughts. As the Lord Jesus Christ observed, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Matthew 12.34-35). It will be the delight of a good man but the death of the evil. It was not true

of Job, of whom it was alleged falsely that “he doth open his mouth in vain” because “he multiplieth words without knowledge” (Job 35.16). But those of whom it is true shall meet disaster.

13.4. Daydreaming will not get us anywhere. Hard work fulfils our dreams. A believer will be helped by the wisdom of Christ to develop a good work ethic. This is not inconsistent with taking time out to refresh our minds and refurnish our creative skills. As the old adage says, “a man does not defraud his master when he pauses to whet his scythe.”

13.5. God hates lies because it comes from the Father of lies, Satan, His opponent and the opponent of all things true and right. A righteous man will therefore hate lying too. Lying is just one expression of wickedness. All wickedness will bring its perpetrator to shame.

13.6. Indeed the Saviour’s righteousness will justify the good man and keep him on the paths of holiness. The wickedness of the sinner will be his downfall.

13.7. There are a number of proverbs which commence “there is that...” We have had one already (11.24) and the expression is an arresting and memorable introduction to the parable which ensues. Both these parables have to do with riches and poverty and encourage a generousheartedness with our use of resources. The very vagueness of the introduction “there is that...” encourages us to think of ways in which the proverb might be true without giving us the answer. One answer might be that the man who has gained his riches by fraud has ruined his character, and the loss of character cannot be offset by the gain of riches. Whereas a shopkeeper who impoverishes himself by not opening on the Lord’s Day may lose his profit but will gain in the wellbeing of God’s approval, which is much more to be desired.

13.8. A rich man can afford to pay a ransom, provided it is tailored to his ability to pay. A poor man will not be targeted and, if captured with a view to setting a ransom for him, will, as likely as not, be released when it is realised that he is so poor. Or, looked at another way, when the rich are being threatened the poor man takes no notice. This is one advantage of being poor.

13.9. The full force of the picture language is achieved on the realisation that the light is a lantern but the lamp a candle, which, of course, is so easy to snuff out. The understanding of a righteous person is clear and steady, opening up the way of life with great pleasure. The wicked walk in darkness. The Lord Jesus Christ said, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8.12).

13.10. Imagine a committee, a cabinet meeting, a privy council. From the highest to the lowest disagreements result from pride; the loftier the pride the sharper the

dissension. However, “in the multitude of counsellors is safety” (Proverbs 11.14), given that they give good advice to their convenor or chairman in all humility and in dependence upon almighty God.

13.11. The obtaining of riches is a constantly recurring theme. Though the book of Proverbs may be studied thematically, the constant recurrence of life’s most necessary instruction is missed without a verse by verse study. We miss the pleading force of the Spirit’s repeated warnings unless we ask each time, “Lord, is it I?” (Matthew 26.22). Wealth may vanish as quickly as it came, a risk that even a good man takes. But he shall recoup under the guidance and by the grace of the Lord. “Vain” and “vanity” in the scriptures mean “empty” and “emptiness.” This proverb refers to wealth obtained by unprincipled means.

13.12. Another very famous proverb. “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick.” When delays in answering prayer are long this promise will give ease, for the Lord does not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men (Lamentations 3.33) by delaying without good reason. He observes all our homesickness, lovesickness and whatever sickness of heart we may feel and when the answer comes the joy of it will strengthen and embolden the pilgrimage of the believer.

13.13. Here is a very severe warning to those who disregard the Bible, the word of God. Disobedience to the law may not now in our day invoke capital punishment, but it might well have done in times past. Those who are diligent in keeping the law will be safe in a well-regulated society and may well, if obedience be matched with ability, receive promotion.

13.14. “This do, and thou shalt live” (Luke 10.28) said the Lord Jesus Christ to a lawyer who ostensibly was asking the Lord how he might be saved. It was a snare in him that he desired to justify himself, something which often stands in the way of many really hearing the good instruction they are being given. Heed Christ’s wisdom and we will be kept in the way of life.

13.15. The Lord’s favour makes the understanding of spiritual things to appear easy and the result is favourable to a believer’s attainments in life. Hard knocks and having constantly to retrace one’s footsteps and repeatedly experiencing setbacks are the sorts of things which are the lot of transgressors.

13.16. A wise believer bargains well but fairly, whereas a fool makes silly suggestions and, if men will deal with him at all, he will come off worst.

13.17. To be a messenger is to be entrusted with important, perhaps life-preserving, even state-preserving information. He should guard it with his life and deliver it promptly. An ambassador keeps hidden his own private views, should they differ, and only pleads the cause of his masters, and the country he has the honour to represent.

We see an example of a fine messenger in Genesis 24 (to get the full impact do read the whole chapter). Abraham's servant prays to God for a good outcome (verses 12-14) and when the success of his journey unfolds beyond his expectations he renders thanks to God again. And then in a most memorable statement (verse 33) says, "I will not eat, until I have told my errand." Subsequently (verses 54,56) he begs "send me away unto my master" and "hinder me not, seeing the LORD hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master." His master's work came first and foremost.

Paul was a wonderful ambassador for Christ. He speaks in the plural, meaning himself and every preacher of the gospel, every Christian while witnessing for Christ. "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us..." (2 Corinthians 5.20).

A wicked messenger may be measured by failing in the standards these good men set. What a healthy outcome is achieved by such a faithful messenger as Abraham's servant.

13.18. This is not the first time this theme has been set before us by the Spirit of Christ. Again the refusal to heed warnings and instructions is a very ingrained characteristic of the human heart, and the remnant of it is often brought over into the believer's life. So it has to be frequently dealt with. We do not find it easy to eat humble pie. But if we learn from our mistakes and put them behind us we may yet have a lifetime of honourable Christian service before us.

13.19. We had "desire" in verse 12. There it was bestowed; here it is earned, achieved. It may take years, but a fixed purpose to which we have dedicated our lives, or a substantial portion of them perhaps, gives a great sense of satisfaction when realised and, if there is to be no pride, causes us to give all the glory to our heavenly Father. All that the foolish can think of is what pleasures they're being deprived of if there is homework, or overtime to be done or unsociable hours to be worked.

13.20. Apprenticeships enable us to learn and work alongside the masters of a trade and observe at first hand, and learn to achieve, their high standard of skills. The best way for a young tenor to learn tenor parts is to be with the tenors in a choir. The principle is well accepted in all sorts of spheres. Seek good company. A young believer should seek the company of mature believers as often as is humanly possible. That way he will become one himself. Join the local gang and you will get caught or hazard even your life.

13.21. How relentless the devil is in pursuing his quarry. Bad habits that he has induced are like a vice or the grip of a biting wild animal. They are hard to be freed from and do much damage. The repayment of the righteous is generous, as we have noticed before from Luke 6.38.

13.22. Psalm 49.16-17 reminds us, “Be not thou afraid when one is made rich, when the glory of his house is increased; for when he dieth he shall carry nothing away.” To the man who asked the Lord Jesus Christ to intervene in a dispute concerning the division of an inheritance between him and his brother, Jesus replied (among other things) “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12.20). By the Lord’s grace and in answer to prayer generation after generation shall benefit from the faithful industry of a righteous man. The sinner’s goods will be taken from him and his family receive no benefit. Above all, a believer should so seek to teach his children and grandchildren and live such a loving and true life toward them as will provide an “inheritance” of Biblical truth in this life and treasures in heaven (Matthew 6.20).

13.23. Here is the third of the “there is that...” proverbs. However impoverished a person is, there is sufficient goodness in the soil to provide nourishment and income sufficient for his family. Despite that, there will be those who out of misplaced priorities whether they be laziness, or pastimes, or gambling or secondary businesses shall see no fruitful crops; and such effort as they have belatedly attempted destroyed.

13.24. This will not be the last time that the theme of chastening will be referred to, for we often need as sinners to be reminded of it, and therefore we should now read again Hebrews 12. 5-11. Received wisdom says that because we love our children we will spare them physical punishment because it will make them cry. It is said to be demeaning. But better to face immediate punishment and it all be over and done with and the lesson swiftly learned than to grow up unchecked because unhurt and ever repeating those things as a young person and an adult which are selfish, cruel and demeaning to others. To permit our offspring to grow up like that is to hate him truly.

13.25. There is a satisfaction, a good conscience which is the gift of God in good, honest and helpful living. Starvation may truly come upon the one who wickedly wastes his substance as with the prodigal son (Luke 15.13-16).

Proverbs 14

14.1. Attention switches particularly in this proverb to the woman’s role. She can either build her house or destroy it. Sometimes the word “house” means “household” and it is the domestic activities which are her prime concern, though if you now read again Proverbs 31. 10-31 you will see that her competency extends beyond domesticity without neglecting it (verses 13-15). It would be good also to read at this point 1 Peter 3.1-6. (The “amazement” deprecated in 1 Peter 3.6 refers to her reaction at Genesis 18.12-15.) It destroys family wellbeing and cohesion if she is neglectful through laziness, indifference or immorality.

14.2. “Walking” and “running” is a frequent description of the Christian “pathway” or “race.” A person who lives according to the commands of the scriptures shows himself to be a God-fearer. One who delights in pursuing the opposite of what is true demonstrates ungodliness.

14.3. Pride betrays itself in speech and, though many are proud, it is a foolish attitude making a rod for our own back. Wise speech will, unless the circumstances are exceptional (as with Ahithophel 2 Samuel 15.31-37;16.23;17.1-23), earn men’s respect who will take care of us to the best of their ability even in difficult times, as was the case ultimately with Jeremiah though often reviled.

14.4 A spotless home is not so welcoming or functional as a well “lived-in” house with the life of its children everywhere obvious. The former may be sterile; the latter has all the possibilities of future generations and successfulness.

14.5. Despite the 9th commandment many will bear false witness still, perhaps arrogantly saying “and who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10.29) or finding some other excuse to evade the direct commandment. “He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not” (Psalm 15.4) shall never be moved, where “changeth” possibly refers to changing the facts to suit himself.

14.6. A scorner disqualifies himself from seeking wisdom for he scorns the very process and the instruction which would provide it. We have a saying, “it’s easy when you know how” and when we are helped by the Holy Spirit of Christ even the most difficult matters open up to us.

14.7. It is unwise to continue debating with, or even instructing, someone once it becomes clear by his replies that it is meaningless to him.

14.8. The wisdom of the Lord Jesus Christ enables us to understand providence, that is the data which the Lord provides as the circumstances of our day to day living. What are we to make of them? How are we to interpret them? What is the Lord directing us into? “O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?” (Matthew 16.3). A foolish person is deceived into continuing in sin, thinking he will not be brought to account. Ultimately, death or the Lord’s return will overtake him, still uncomprehending. “If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes” (Luke 19.42). “Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares” (Luke 21.34).

14.9. When it comes to modifying our behaviour, what matters more? God’s approval, or that men mock us. Should not our heavenly Father’s favour weigh more with us than the immediate, visible effects of the unbelievers’ mockery or disdain?

14.10. There are some things so private and intimate that they are never disclosed, even to the nearest and dearest lest they should have sorrow upon sorrow (Philippians 2.27). Perhaps it is scarcely possible to put into words, in any case, what is felt. That is why spiritual ministrations through the foolishness of preaching are so helpful for they reach where no man, only the Lord, can reach. Though we cannot describe our bitterness we know we have it and that it colours our life. In quite the opposite way, but with just the same inward privacy, no one can enter into our joy, though they may understand it in theory. The joy of a much prayed for child being saved, after many, many prayers for example. Of course, other believers will appreciate that we are thrilled, but how thrilled only we know. It maybe that psychoanalysis intermeddles where it is not only unwelcome but, despite claims to the contrary, unhealthy.

14.11. Though it is built upon firm foundations the Lord will find other ways of destroying not so much the house necessarily as the household of an evil family. Though a poor man be a wanderer and move about a great deal, for a tabernacle is a tent which can be speedily erected and taken down, nothing can remove the blessing upon him and his wherever they abide.

14.12. This is another constantly recurring theme, so much so, that the exact wording is reproduced in Proverbs 16.25. A man may be often mistaken, but here the emphasis is particularly upon a fixed agenda of ungodly lifestyle on which he has set his heart. The ramifications of an ungodly lifestyle are more far reaching than might at first be thought. He may think it doesn't matter to God, but does he with fixed regularity take the Lord's name in vain (Exodus 20.7), go shopping on Sunday or play and watch sport? (Exodus 20.8-11) The Lord Jesus Christ says, "wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat" (Matthew 7.13) Even down to our words there are serious ramifications, as Jesus in the same speech (the sermon on the mount) declared:- "let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil" (Matthew 5.37). "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15.18). To the best of our ability and with the Lord's help we must think through the logic of our lifestyle and determine where it is leading. If to the condemnation of the Lord, we could do no better than to repent and seek a better way in Christ for our eternal salvation's sake.

14.13. The clowns who are able to portray sadness with their lightheartedness evoke a certain wistfulness, for we understand what it is like to carry on in our lives despite sadness and grief, even smiling wanly at others' jokes to keep up appearances. Though we must carry on we must not assume that everyone else's laughter is any different from our own but rather seek to minister grace to our hearers as often as circumstances permit.

14.14. Among believers, the term "backsliding" is almost a technical term for those who are dropping out of their Christian discipleship, temporarily or otherwise. Apart from

Jeremiah and Hosea it is only found here in the Old Testament and is not a New Testament expression at all. Now Solomon is earlier than either Jeremiah or Hosea so that, although the word he uses is not identical, the concept is similar and we may attribute to Solomon the origin under the Holy Spirit of this evocative expression. For sliding backwards suggests being increasingly rapidly out of control. If it means (as probably) in a backward direction then, just as we speak of a combined speed in a head-on collision of two cars travelling each at 60mph to be 120mph, it speaks of a rapid falling behind combined with the increasing progress of the one who is pressing onwards. It makes a vast difference in the running of the race of life. There is also just the suggestion of sliding on one's back where loss of control would be perhaps more significant than the speed. Both spell danger.

As we have learned from Matthew 15.18-20 (but do read these verses again now) "out of the heart proceed evil thoughts" and many other things, so that the backslider in heart has the mainspring faulty, the fountain poisoned; which will, of course, affect everything else. His own ways are, in fact, the ways of death. But the righteous who holds on his way shall be stronger and stronger (Job 17.9) and inner strength shall support him to his great satisfaction. This life is well described by Paul in Colossians 1.10-12 "that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."

14.15. We are daily bombarded by the media with countless opinions whose origins and agendas we cannot begin to guess, except that they are likely to be of the evil one. If we are not to be taken in by specious arguments, specious because based on false premises which, maybe, we cannot spot, then we must look well to how we proceed lest we be taken in. We must, since we are in the world but not of it, seek to draw near to the Saviour who constantly prays for us, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17.15-16). Caution and prayerfulness will provide the seedbed for the wisdom the scriptures will impart to us. Then we shall not be taken in and deceived.

14.16. Again we have another oft repeated theme. In Proverbs 16.6 we have, "by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil." David says (Psalm 36.1) "The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes." God-fearers may not necessarily be saved but they do help to preserve a nation. If the government of any nation is ungodly then we shall soon see immoral laws passed and wicked deeds being openly encouraged in law. Like a raging storm the ungodly are fierce to overturn quiet and godly ways believing that God neither hears nor sees. "Understand, ye

brutish among the people: and ye fools, when will ye be wise? He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye, shall he not see?...he that teacheth man knowledge, shall he not know? The LORD knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity” (Psalm 94. 8-11).

14.17. A person whose wrath is aroused over the slightest matter, out of all proportion to the offence (even if there was one) rages intemperately and deals with those who meet him viciously so that those who know what he is like hate to meet him.

14.18. Knowledge is the summit of wisdom, especially the knowledge of God. Paul says that the things that were gain to him he counted loss for Christ “that I may know him” (Philippians 3.10). “What doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6.8). Fools do not value knowledge in others or in themselves. The great uneducated may deride the education of those who hold high office, whereas those who are wise without formal education will not react like that.

14.19. In a well-ordered nation state or community this proverb would be true but must wait for ideal days. More often it is not and so this proverb directs our thoughts to the final judgment. The condition which prevails because of the aggravation of sin, where the wicked seem to prosper well set out in Psalm 73 which it would be well to read at this time. It will instruct us lest we fall into the psalmist’s error, and will show us the final end of the wicked lest we should be tempted to give up good for evil, faith for doubt.

14.20. Whereas the previous proverb described a state that should be but often isn’t, this proverb describes a state that shouldn’t be but often is. The poor should not be hated, especially not because he is poor, and still more not so because he is one’s neighbour. “Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee” (Proverbs 3.29). There is of course more opportunity for dissension between neighbours because of their proximity, and it is therefore essential that our relationships be kept free from bitterness and rancour. What it may lead to if left unchecked is well illustrated in Deuteronomy 19.11-13:- “but if any man hate his neighbour, and lie in wait for him, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally that he die...thine eye shall not pity him, but thou shalt put away the guilt of innocent blood...” To make friends with the rich simply because they are rich is despicable, for friendship should be extended to rich and poor alike. Friendship is surely cultivated on quite a different basis.

14.21. In this proverb the theme of “neighbour” and “the poor” is continued. These links help memorisation in a book where the diverse themes make it very difficult to do so, though individual verses are very memorable. It is not good to despise anyone, still less a neighbour. It is good to show mercy, especially to the poor who cannot

repay you. “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5.7). “When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14.13-14).

14.22. “A heart that deviseth wicked imaginations” (Proverbs 6.18) is one of the things that are a most hateful abomination unto the LORD. For, again, this is the mark of Satan’s fall, personified under the image of the king of Tyrus (Tyre), “thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee...thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness” (Ezekiel 28. 15-17). (This must refer to Satan, for since the fall no one has been created perfect. Of all the creatures that pre-date the fall only Satan and the angels who fell with him could be described as perfect yet becoming corrupted. And it is the leader who is spoken of here.) We are not ignorant of Satan’s devices (2 Corinthians 2.11) and when the people are not taught they will say “There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imaginations of our heart” (Jeremiah 18.12) to their own destruction. If we do not constantly seek to do the Lord’s will we will follow, quite naturally, the devices of our own fallen nature. We must in this, in particular, be like the Saviour who said, “I do always those things that please him (the Father)” (John 8.29) and “all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known...” (John 15.15). As we have often seen, repeated frequently because it is such a powerful incentive, “mercy and truth shall be to them that devise good.”

14.23. Again this proverb is a renewed appeal of Christ in His wisdom to encourage labour and to discourage mere talk. It is encouraging to see the choice of wording here – “all labour,” even the most hands on, even the most menial, brings its reward. If we are all words and no action then we might expect to earn but little.

14.24. By definition one would suppose that the foolishness of fools is folly. But in the English, at any rate, the constant alliteration makes it easy to remember and serves to accentuate, to spell out the exceeding foolishness of folly. A monarch might have many crowns. Knowledge is a crown (verse 18). The wise have riches as a crown, in a lesser sense because they have reaped the reward of their work but in a higher sense by faith having entered into the exceeding riches, (Ephesians 2.7), the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3.8).

14.25. Trustworthy evidence establishes facts; and facts will acquit the innocent. But hearsay or, still worse, fabrication effectively deceives and causes miscarriages of justice. A believer is to be absolutely transparent in this matter.

14.26. “Strong confidence” and “refuge” are powerful words. To believe in God, to fear Him and, better still by far, to trust Him for acceptance in His beloved Son the Lord Jesus Christ is the greatest strength known to man. Jeremiah, who surely should know,

says “O LORD, my strength and my fortress, and my refuge in day of affliction” (Jeremiah 16.19). It is the man, Christ Jesus, who is described in Isaiah 32.2, “A man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of waters in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.” The psalmist prays to Christ, “Be thou my strong habitation whereunto I may continually resort” (Psalm 71.3). A true believer surely knows this experience, it has been verified to him:- “Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8.15-17).

14.27. A fountain, such a refreshing source to revive life, is contrasted with a snare, a trap, which is a means of capture and death. After being held in the chains of atheism and unbelief the first refreshing, reviving drink is faith in the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. “Let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Revelation 22.17).

14.28. The more people there are in a kingdom the greater it is and the greater the prestige of the king. If it is depopulated then there will be few to defend it. The Lord Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and, though in any one generation His people might appear to be in a minority, yet over all the generations of the world’s history it will prove to be the most numerous of any kingdom. And, what is more, it is increasing daily.

14.29. Solomon’s father, David, wrote in Psalm 103.8, “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy” and it is possible that this is something he had been taught by his father. Perhaps he had heard him tell of his hastiness and Abigail’s restraining of him spoken of in 1 Samuel 25. 10-31. Perhaps he had observed David’s example all these years after he had learned his lesson, for, as he says, “I was my father’s son...he taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live” (Proverbs 4. 3-4). We may alienate people for years, to say nothing of doing them physical violence, if we have a hasty temper. Such a person may be held up as an example of supreme folly.

14.30. We have had virtually the same expression as “rotteness of the bones” in Proverbs 12.4. We have only to think of leprosy, gangrene or even arthritis to know the misery it causes. On a purely physical level a sound heart prolongs life. Envy, of course, is not a physical thing but it affects our wellbeing very adversely. Envy, should there be a residue brought over from our unconverted life, will grievously affect our Christian affections.

14.31. The psalmist wrote of the LORD, “He hath dispersed, he hath given to the poor” (Psalm 112.9) and, of course, it follows that to oppress them is to act the opposite part towards them and therefore to reproach their Maker. Isaiah later wrote (25.4) “Thou

has been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm” indicating, as in so many other places of scripture, that the Lord has a special interest in the disadvantaged. Jesus was poor, of whom it written, “poor, yet making many rich” (2 Corinthians 6.10); and “for your sakes he became poor” (2 Corinthians 8.9). The disciples were forward to remember the poor (Galatians 2.10) and, supremely, “Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?” (James 2. 5-6). It is a characteristic of a believer that he has mercy on the poor.

14.32. When it comes to the final judgment then this proverb shall be most truly fulfilled. “Depart from me, ye cursed” (Matthew 25.41) is surely a driving away of the wicked in his wickedness. Read Matthew 25. 31-46. The earlier part of that passage speaks of the hope which the righteous person has after death.

14.33. Wisdom is the application of knowledge under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of Christ to differing situations which arise. It will always be the essential approach of the one who waits on the Lord and can be therefore said to reside in his heart. It is a procedure which he loves; to pray, to understand the scriptures and to observe the providences. The immoderate, banal, inappropriate or rash reaction of the foolish reveals what is at the heart of their responses.

14.34. Again, one of the “top ten” famous proverbs. A nation is prospered by its worship of the living God by Whom it is enabled to exercise a just judicial system, an equitable government and enjoy the high favours of peace and fruitfulness. Not only nations, but smaller communities, tribes, cities, and societies of all sorts are betrayed should they be characterised by evil. All right thinking people will reproach them and God will reject them unless they repent. A good verse to memorise.

14.35. One aspect of the LORD’s punishment of David in the matter of Bathsheba was “because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die” (2 Samuel 12.14). David had caused shame to the Lord and to His attributes and methods of government. The Lord did not “change His mind” about the child even after David’s prayers. David was most often a wise servant and many times knew the favour of the Lord; in raising him up to be king; in making him a sweet psalmist; and enabling him as a ruler over men to be just. A believer must be as circumspect as possible not to cause shame to the Saviour.

Proverbs 15

15.1. Another proverb to memorise! Gentle speech must be the daily practice of a believer so that when perceived or real hurt is unexpectedly encountered and passions

are roused it is second nature to reply gently. Horatius Bonar the hymnwriter speaks of brethren in theological debate,

“In days of public strife, when sharp and stinging,
The angry words went daily to and fro,
Friend against friends the polished missiles flinging,
Each seeking who could launch the keenest blow...”

stirring up anger; and there is much on the internet which breathes the same hasty spirit. Brethren these things ought not so to be. Situations get out of hand so speedily and leave wounds and regrets long after the incident is over. How surprisingly, sometimes, the temper subsides with a kind and gentle word.

15.2. A public speaker; an adviser in the corridors of power or small committee; an individual in personal or private conversation – all may, under the guidance of the Lord, be skilled to marshal all their array of accumulated learning to bring it to bear on the matter in hand to the great benefit of all. The foolish speak to the detriment of all who hear. Their words seem to gush forth. If only nothing was spoken in a weighty matter no great harm might come by it, but the torrent of their ill-considered words may lead to much recklessness. A fine example of both aspects of this proverb is to be found in Acts 19.23-41. When Demetrius spoke, “the whole city was filled with confusion...they rushed with one accord into the theatre” and the greater part “knew not wherefore they were come together...all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.” The townclerk, in response, spoke very sensibly and firmly and with authority dismissed the people.

15.3. The Lord misses nothing. He is so great that He knows all thoughts before they become words; all speech before it becomes actions; all interactions of the written or spoken word upon each reader or hearer. He does not forget them, else how could He judge the world? Again, this is a truth that is set before us a number of times in scripture as, for example, in 2 Chronicles 16.9, “the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him.”

15.4. What an evocative, memorable expression “a wholesome tongue” is! Better still, to have such a tongue. The original Hebrew, as in the margin, is, “the healing of the tongue.” When a believer is born again, “he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5.17). And if such formerly owned a bitter, swearing, lying tongue what a wholesome change a wholesome tongue is! In a winter storm the sea may breach the defences. It may turn fresh water pools saline and destroy them as havens of wildlife, at least for some years. It may inundate houses, ruining possessions and causing havoc to clean up, while leaving its mark for many years. So is the breach caused by the hurt it does to the spirit of the one who so speaks and the one who is unfortunate enough to be the butt of the speech or who overhears and feels contaminated by it.

15.5. Children are often impatient of learning. A parent tries to teach them something vital and they say, "I know. I know." But they don't know. We know they are not listening and, at the very least, it is exasperating. They will have to learn the hard way. In some things that is good, but not in dangerous or urgent matters. Reproof is never welcome at first and this is why it is such a recurrent theme of the scriptures and particularly of this chapter. We always need to be reminded to take on board good advice and be warned of the consequences of our folly.

15.6. Again this proverb may be considered on two levels, the natural and the spiritual. All the resources of the wicked are dedicated to one end; trouble. But in those of the righteous their investment is to build up their family heritage. But even the poor of this world who are spiritually rich are filled with the treasures of wisdom and knowledge which are hidden with God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 2.2-3).

15.7. The dissemination of knowledge is every teacher's aim and that of every wise parent. It is a foolish parent who does not care sufficiently or has not the wit sufficiently to teach their child.

15.8. Even though it is a command of the Lord to sacrifice, His name is dishonoured when a devotee does so in an unrepentantly wicked frame of mind. "Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them" (Amos 5.22). "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4.24). "Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart...He shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation" (Psalm 24.3-5).

15.9. This and the previous proverb form a couplet, the former being about worship and verse 9 about daily living. It is just the same principle. Whether our worship or our lifestyle it is either performed in unrepentant contradiction to God's laws, in which case it is utterly hateful and rejected; or else we seek to please God, and then He delights in and loves those whose choice is to embrace His ways.

15.10. As recently as verse 5 we had this constantly recurring theme, so we may gather the urgency as well as the importance of learning this truth. It may require a long apprenticeship. If our conscience tells us we are in the wrong we don't like to be told. But if we're not told then we shall just note what our conscience is telling us and proceed to ignore it. The reason for finding correction unacceptable is that it challenges the course of action on which we have set our heart and will require from us a change of heart if the advice is to be heeded. That's the rub. It will be the death of us and the perishing of our soul to remain heedless, however.

15.11. If the ultimate conclusion of disobedience towards God, hell and destruction, is clearly visible and apparent to God how much more so the hearts of those en route to such an end without the intervention of faith in the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ which God hath brought to light for us in the gospel. “Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, fear him” (Luke 12.5).

15.12. The very first psalm warns us (verse 1) not to sit “in the seat of the scornful.” There is a positive blessing from God to be had in not doing so. But one of the hardening effects of learning to be a despiser, a mocker, a scorner is the disinclination to receive advice. And, of course, all advice to the scorner must needs be reproof. As for an initiative to seek helpful instruction, it will never enter his head.

15.13. Our face will reflect our inner disharmony. We may put on a brave face but we can't keep up such a mask for ever. In modern English “merry” has come to be associated with being mildly inebriate. But it was not always so. It speaks of lightheartedness in the sense of not being weighed down with care or overmuch sorrow. Sorrow breaks the heart. There is a difference between a broken heart and a wounded heart or spirit (Proverbs 18.14) where, strangely enough, the wounded spirit is the more serious malady. The broken heart may be healed. “He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted” (Isaiah 61.1). Quoting this verse, the Lord Jesus Christ declared, “he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted” (Luke 4.18). We will think about the wounded heart when we reach chapter 18.

15.14. Again we revert to a theme that we have already had this chapter, intertwined with other recurring themes. Repetition and revision are the key to memorisation and acquiring experience. Seek knowledge at all times; be a lifelong student. Feed your mind and affection on spiritual things. “Not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2.13).

15.15. At one level this proverb is urging us to make the best of affliction by counteracting it with a merry heart continually, though this is easier said than done. However, on a spiritual level we should understand from Lamentations 3.33 that the Lord God “doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.” It is for the believer's good. “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4. 17-18). Therefore to enjoy a continual feast of good things in the midst of affliction enables us, to the extent in which we are able to attain it, the better to praise the Lord for all His kindness towards us in all things; knowing that “the LORD will perfect that which concerneth me” (Psalm 138.8).

15.16,17. Here are two more “better is...” proverbs, and there are more to come. What is emphatically taught is that the fear of the LORD, and the trusting in the Saviour, makes everything else come right. If we have little it matters not, for with Christ we have all. And when the trouble of managing large affairs, businesses or households is considered, small may well be thought to be beautiful. The same may be said for love. A small vegetarian meal is to be preferred to a feast if everything is lovingly provided and lovingly enjoyed with loving conversation. Without that it is emptiness indeed.

15.18. “Appease” is the very word used in Acts 19.35, which we looked at earlier, in connection with the wisdom shown by the townclerk of Ephesus in appeasing strife. Angry Demetrius made the crowd wrathful (Acts 19.28) and “no small stir” (Acts 19.23) occurred. See how the Holy Spirit Himself provides the commentary on this verse, giving Luke (who wrote Acts) the very words previously used here in Proverbs.

15.19. It’s difficult to get through a hedge of thorns and it’s difficult to get through a day’s work with a lazy employee. The margin suggests that the picture is of a causeway, a raised and level embankment over difficult territory for ease of passage. So the believer will find the hardest going relieved because the Lord is accompanying us and working all things together for good (Romans 8.28).

15.20. We had a very similar proverb in chapter 10.1. With this difference, that here the foolish man is not merely the heaviness of his mother but by his action despises his mother. He might not mean to be quite as mean towards her, but this is ultimately what his action signifies and, of course, is a breach of the 4th commandment (Exodus 20.12).

15.21. We are in the midst of a “revision” passage. This verse revises, in different words, the substance of 10.23. There are those who delight in foolery and everything else is boring. The wisdom of a man of understanding (10.23) is to walk through life honestly and ably.

15.22 revises 11.14. A matter should be thoroughly considered and talked through in cabinet, if the government; with family members, if family affairs; with church officers if church matters - where unilateral action is generally unwise.

15.23. Of the Saviour it is said, “The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary” (Isaiah 50.4). And in Christ every believer may do the same. How apposite is the right word at the right time, especially if it were unbeknown to us at the time and all of the Lord! When our speech brings pleasure what an encouragement it is to speaker and hearer alike.

15.24. The Lord Jesus said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for

yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6.19-21). But our proverb speaks of looking to the Lord above to avoid hell, not simply loss or damage upon earth. Our soul’s interests are at stake here. Look up to the only Saviour. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3.14-15).

15.25. The surrounding border of a house is more extensive than the house itself, and though the house be small (as probably in the case of a widow) all taken together might be smaller than the house of a proud man. But we must consider our ways and turn from pride if our lifetime’s work is to be established by the Lord. “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 John 2.16-17).

15.26. Revision again; see verse 9. Everything about the wicked is an abomination according to verse 9; here the thoughts, which prompt the way, are singled out. “We all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind” (Ephesians 2.3). The words of the pure are pleasant not only to man but most importantly of all to God.

15.27. The ever insistent desire for profitmaking destroys banks and business houses when they overreach themselves; it is a not dissimilar desire ever to be seeking promotion. If bribery and corruption is involved, by implication the death of that institution or career is signalled, for “he that hateth gifts shall live.” Even if promotion or profit is sought without deceit, it is liable to instil greediness for more. But the sure way to survive under the Lord’s good hand is to avoid all bribery, whether of giving or receiving, and live a straightforward life looking for His blessing and His promotion alone.

15.28. Believers are mandated, “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3.15). A carefully thought out reply is appropriate for a carefully thought out faith. A fool with no faith and nothing to say does not stop to think about the torrent of his words. If drunk, he may scarce know that he has said them.

15.29. “O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come” (Psalm 65.2). When the righteous approaches he shall be heard, but the wicked, though he approach, will not be received nor answered. As Jesus before Pilate, “He answered him to never a word” (Matthew 27.14).

15.30-31. The next two proverbs speak of the welfare of the eyes, the bones and the ear. What the eyes see of a lovely scene, or especially the opening of the eyes in understanding, brings happiness to our very being. Likewise good news relieves our fears and removes the weight of uncertainty, thereby giving great relief and incentive to pursue our lives again. Reproof does not seem to be such a glad vista or as welcome as good news but it is, if anything, more profitable and more conducive to taking up life again with renewed energy. It is not the end of the world to make an error; indeed it is the pathway to being considered wise if we profit from our mistakes and gladly learn from those who point them out to us.

15.32. More about handling reproof. It is so needful to know how to take it. Our very life is threatened by hardening our hearts against instruction, our very soul by hardening our hearts against the instruction of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we take heed to reproof, and obey it, we shall go on to make progress.

15.33. A number of proverbs commence with the words “the fear of the LORD.” To receive the instruction of the wisdom which is in Christ, the wisdom which is declared in this whole book of Proverbs and throughout the whole of the Bible, is to demonstrate regard for the Lord who, being the Creator and knowing all things, has so many things to impart. “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now” (John 16.12), said the Saviour just before the crucifixion. As far as lies within us let us be ready at all times to be teachable, and to learn from all situations. Christ endured the humiliation of life in this world before entering into His glory. It is the same pattern with us. “And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual...and as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly” (1 Corinthians 15. 45-49). To get the full force of this progression from humility to honour read the whole of 1 Corinthians 15. 35-58.

Proverbs 16

16.1. Our dispositions and gifts of speech or writing (or whatever) are from the Lord. He gives gifts and supervises our schooling to prepare us for the life He has planned for us, whether we are believers in Christ or not. The clue, however, lies in the second part of the verse concerning “the answer of the tongue.” We have seen so often that speech may not be edifying nor originate with God, even as the Saviour said, “Let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil” (Matthew 5.37). This proverb is best fulfilled in the one who is born again. “It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Philippians 2.13). “But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it

shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you” (Matthew 10.19-20).

16.2. We all think we are in the right and will set about justifying ourselves if challenged. In one sense this may be good, for if we have thought things through and have the courage of our convictions we are satisfied and don't need “to reinvent the wheel” every time that issue comes up. We will be able to give good and convincing reasons which may, or may not, satisfy those who disagree. We may have to agree to disagree. However, it may not be so good if our behaviour is challenged, not so good as it ought to be, and we justify ourselves and make excuses for what may be indefensible conduct. What matters is what the Lord makes of it all. Let us submit our intentions, actions, words throughout our days to the Lord first of all.

16.3. This verse is the logical conclusion of the previous one. It is by committing our ways to Him that we may look to the Lord to guide us through His word and also by His providences. So inward is this that it extends even to the very thoughts we will think, from which proceed our words and actions. This brings back to our minds Proverbs 3. 5-6 which it enables us to revise and see what progress, as good disciples, as good apprentices, we have made.

16.4. This is a far-reaching verse. It asserts that the Lord accepts all responsibility for His creation. “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4.11). “Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?” (Romans 9.21-24). “Shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?” (Amos 3.6). “For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (Romans 9.17-18).

16.5. Pride is a cardinal sin which must be put down ruthlessly in every believer. Where proud peoples make alliances, especially against God, they are too weak to resist His might. “Say ye not, A confederacy, to all them to whom this people shall say, A confederacy; neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.” (Isaiah 8.12-13).

16.6. Three very powerful forces are ordinarily at work to root out wrongdoing. Men often respond to mercy and resolve, whether successfully or not, to mend their ways.

But the mercy of God revealed to His people in the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary (that is, the atoning power of His blood to cover sin, repented of and confessed) overwhelms the soul and is a potent force in directing a new subsequent life. Truth likewise roots out all sin and error and prompts the convicted sinner to cry out for the mercy mentioned already. In a court of law, when truth is proved, the alleged crime in dispute is judged definitively and right established. The church, which is, of course, made up of its individual members, is called in 1 Timothy 3.15 “the pillar and ground of the truth.” The fear of the LORD is preventative, whereas mercy and truth teach us the proper course of action when we have already gone astray. To see ourselves as others see us may help us to evaluate our lives; but to see ourselves as God sees us, unless we harden our hearts, is to begin to understand how wayward we are. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17.9).

16.7. This is a wonderful proverb. It does not promise that everything will be smooth but that those who dislike us or who are opposed to our views and are hostile in their attitude will be kept subdued by the Lord. What a powerful incentive this is to please Him. If even his enemies are quiet, how much more will other events work together for good (Romans 8.28). Believers are not to make enemies. “But I say unto you, Love your enemies” (Matthew 5.44). There are those who will make enemies of us. This proverb refers to our day to day living. When Paul preached the gospel he roused hostility and that did not mean that his ways did not please the Lord. Far from it. And we shall find opposition in gospel work and must not shirk it on that account.

16.8. Whether we have much or little it must be obtained by legitimate means, else it will pall. There will be no blessing from the Lord if our lives are full of, or tainted by, ill-gotten gains.

16.9. This is one of a number of proverbs on the subject, and is a variation on 16.2. We make our plans but we do not always know what is best. Even down to daily arrangements the Lord must have the final word if we are not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and meet with some contretemps. If the Lord directs our steps, we may tiptoe even through troubles which are flooding through our lives and come safely out on the other side dry shod. Believers are “his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2.10).

16.10. The divine right of kings was strongly upheld by Protestant monarchs and as equally hotly contested by those who shared the same Reformation fundamentals. And the pope, who falsely claims kingly rights, also claims when speaking *ex cathedra* (that is, from the papal throne, speaking not privately but in his official capacity) to be infallible. This proverb seems at first sight to give some credence to the view that kings can't go wrong. In autocratic monarchy he certainly has the last word but that

hasn't historically always made him right! However, taken in conjunction with the previous proverb, if a king as king seeks the Lord's direction in his official capacities, he will find (as all individuals and the king in his individual capacity will) that his direction will be sure and from the Lord.

16.11. "Dost thou know the balancing of the clouds?" (Job 37.16). If the Lord permits such an expression to be used as descriptive of His handiwork, then we may consider balancing to be a nicety of precision that is characteristic of the Almighty, Creator God. That being so, justice (think of the scales of justice at the Old Bailey, for example) and just dealings in ordinary affairs, especially purchases, are to be scrutinized to an exactitude by ourselves and will be so examined by God. As we have seen in an earlier proverb, if the weights are not correct, then, however it looks as if the proper procedures have been followed, there is dishonesty at the heart.

16.12. Kingly rule and any other form of government will only survive if righteousness is sought and prevails in high places. Of the Lord it is written (Psalm 97.2) "righteousness and judgment are the habitation (in the margin, establishment) of his throne." That being the case, and as God is consistent in all His dealings, He demands of an earthly king, president, figurehead (and whoever has ultimate authority) righteousness and judgment, whether it be good decision making or justice.

16.13-15. There are three more proverbs concerning kings in quick succession. King Solomon speaks from firsthand knowledge in all these matters, whether of success or failure. Good counsellors, just judges and lawyers beyond the reach of corruption, honest citizens – all these give pleasure to a good ruler, for "He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain" (2 Samuel 23. 3-4). King David, with almost his last words, explicitly says that the God of Israel, the Rock of Israel personally instructed him in this important matter, and I think we may be sure that he would have so taught Solomon his son. If a king is angry he is to be feared, for an absolute monarch has the power to sentence to death. If he is being unjust, irrational or rash an able counsellor may skilfully calm him. Calm speech helps in all situations. There are echoes in verse 15 of what David had been taught in 2 Samuel 23.4 concerning "clear shining after rain." The grace, the favour of King Jesus is like this. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all" (Romans 16.24). "By grace ye are saved...that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2.5,7).

16.16. This is revising again! Proverbs 8.10. Maybe, as Solomon has progressed through eight chapters since the previous mention of the subject, he thinks by the Spirit that it is an appropriate time for assessment. All these proverbs which we have considered, are they maintaining their hold upon our lives? If we have truly amassed them let us,

in evaluating their wisdom, account them to be a hoard of gold and silver, if well applied to our lives.

16.17. A highway is a main road, so that we may say that it is the main way of a believer, the great exercise along the pilgrim way, to be justified in Christ with His righteousness which cleanses from all sin and to continue with sanctified thoughts and just actions. Just as Jesus says, "I am the light of the world" (John 8.12) He also said concerning His disciples, "Ye are the light of the world" (Matthew 5.14). Similarly here we are told that the believer in keeping his way preserveth his soul; but in Psalm 121.7 it is said of the LORD Himself, "he shall preserve thy soul." From which we learn that all our attainments, of whatever sort, are because the Lord has first given us to share in His own gifts which He expects us to use.

16.18. We have shortened this in our familiar English usage to "pride goes before a fall" which is true enough, but in omitting the parallelism, or summarizing it in that way, we habitually miss the rather more challenging lesson that "pride goeth before destruction." Certainly the haughty spirit causes a fall, but the ultimate end, if persisted in, is self-destruction. Haman is a prize example; and, so long as it is not ourselves who are thus trapped, it is quite amusing really. Read Esther chapters 6&7 to get the full force of this classic example. We are to learn from other people's punishments and confess our sins to the Lord, and say to ourselves very often, "there, but for the grace of God, go I."

16.19. Dividing the spoil is what the all-victorious conqueror does with his men or his allies. It is what Christ has done after His resurrection. "Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53.12). "And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2.15). "He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death" (Philippians 2.8). We see the Saviour as supremely meek becoming the supreme Victor. This is He with Whom we should associate and share His spirit.

16.20. A believer will handle a matter wisely in the spirit of meekness. "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord," says Paul, "beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4.1-3). Goodness and happiness greatly enrich the soul with peace. Trusting the Saviour utterly brings the greatest contentment.

16.21. It is good to have a reputation, if it be justified, for wisdom and its practical outcomes, of which prudence is an example. We anticipate a later proverb (27.2), "Let another praise thee, and not thine own mouth." And it is also written (2 Corinthians

10.18), “For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth.” “The sweetness of the lips” is a wonderful expression, but how does it increase learning? Well, an attractive presentation of a lecture, or an argument, or advice or any teaching helps the hearer listen and assimilate. But the teacher’s very acceptance by his hearers will send him scurrying to his books to learn more for himself; more thoroughly perhaps, more in volume certainly. It will, all in all, be a continually mutually beneficial experience.

16.22. Not all learning brings understanding. It may, for example, confuse the mind. This is why we should earnestly beseech the Holy Spirit to explain to us the scriptures, opening up our minds to them. But seeing that the Lord is Creator, there is nothing that He does not know, and He has observed the unfolding of all the events which He has precipitated, so we may ask the same Holy Spirit to give us a grasp, a handle (as verse 20 suggests) on all our secular studies too.. To be able to attain to a whole, unified view of life, and to do so in Christ (who is “head over all things to the church” (Ephesians 1.22)) is an unceasing stream of blessing which constantly refreshes. If we were to change the picture and think of “mainspring” it keeps us ticking as a well-regulated clock that will scarcely vary a minute over an extended period in telling us the real time. So our spring will enrich others and be a faithful witness to, and representation of, the Saviour. “All my springs are in thee” (Psalm 87.7). As we have seen before, fools cannot be helped. The fallout from the teaching profession perhaps lies partly in this that, in some areas, there is too great a percentage of pupils who are unwilling to learn, causing frustration to a competent teacher.

16.23. If your heart is not in something, you will not learn and will probably be a complainer. We have read of the outpourings of an unregenerate heart in Mark 7.21-23 and Matthew 15.18-20. A believer is to put his heart into something so that his heart is united (Psalm 86.11) in the work ethic which the Lord Jesus Christ teaches. It is a believer’s wisdom to search and understand the scriptures and he will then have some good encouragement from that source to share with others.

16.24. We have learned in Proverbs 3.17 concerning wisdom, that “her ways are ways of pleasantness” and we have just thought of the sweetness of what proceeds from wisdom in verse 21. What a help, what an encouragement we may be with our words! They will benefit the very soul of those with whom we come into contact, in the very deepest places of their lives, and perhaps at the most crucial times of their lives of which we may be ignorant. Pain in the bones is very hard to bear. We also speak of “the bones of a matter.” Health to the bones is a wonderful picture of how beneficial our words may be in the very fundamentals of life and at the most painful times.

16.25. Another of the “top ten” famous proverbs! Identical (except “that” for “which”) to 14.12. Whatever springs most rapidly to mind may well spring from the remnant of our old, not thoroughly yet subdued, nature. We will want to do it, and if we are

impetuous by nature, will not consult the Lord before we have prematurely acted. Young love is specially prone to this fault, with disastrous lifetime consequences, sometimes. Because a believer throughout life is in such continual contact with the world, he must learn in all things, in all things without exception, to refer them to the Saviour's wisdom before acting on seemingly good ideas, whims, propositions, issues or anything at all. The consequences can be irremediable and, at the very least, inconvenient and not conducive to our service in the church, in the Master's kingdom.

16.26. It seems likely that this proverb is a couplet with verse 27 and therefore to be interpreted in a bad sense. That is, that the man spoken of as labouring is ungodly, his motive selfish and his mouth greedy. It implies that he will never be satisfied, and always needing more to satisfy ever voracious cravings.

16.27. If we dig our gardens we will turn up worms. It is the aim of the ungodly to bring back past hurts; to hurt again when they have been laid to rest, as best may be, and forgiven, certainly, in Christ. Fire is one thing that rages out of control, ever spreading and likewise is the speech of the ungodly. James in his third chapter, verses 1&10, indicates that he is speaking to brethren. He says (verse 10) that certain things ought not to be so. That is, that professing Christians have brought over from their old way of life things which should have been left behind and have no part in a Christian's manner. Speech is his subject matter. "Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell...the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be" (James 3.5-10). Douse this burning fire, believer!

16.28. The picture language of sowing (by hand, in those days) suggests spreading and scattering strife, which was also, in its different way, the theme of the previous proverb. Believers are not to scatter or spread strife, or to multiply difficulties for others. Suspicion is a tool of the evil one to put doubt about somebody or something in our mind where, as likely as not, there is no taint. But once suspicion has been registered in the mind it is likely to be often recalled at the slightest subsequent instigation. It causes us to look askance at those whom we trusted, and puts a wedge between the closest of friends. The expression "whisperer" suggests that there is not known to be a fact, else it could be declared out loud and refuted if need be. But a suspicion, a rumour, even if we say there is no truth in it, sticks irrationally and ruins lives, as it is designed by the evil one and his agents to do.

16.29. Violence is much more high profile. But even so there are those to whom it appeals in the weakness of their nature and who can easily be persuaded that it is the life for them. Keep clear of such, for they live in every age, in every community.

16.30. Here we have a picture of the violent man meditating evil, and perhaps muttering to himself as he plans his evil purposes and brings them one stage nearer fruition.

16.31. The senior years of an older person should be the pinnacle of his life's work, provided only that these years are not the crowning ignominy of an habitually sin-orientated lifestyle. A believer should not dread advanced years for, whether in retirement or in the sunset days of his labour, his vast and wise experience cannot be quantified and in exercise brings much expertise to his juniors and much rare wisdom to his peers.

16.32. Perhaps Solomon had meditated on his father David's words, "My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build an house unto the name of the LORD my God: but the word of the LORD came to me saying, Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build a house unto my name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in my sight. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about" (1 Chronicles 22.7-9). Though military leaders are highly valued, yet theirs is not the highest calling in the land. So, within the realm of the temper and the spiritual life, to control one's spirit is a greater skill which is more greatly to be commended than capturing a city; and containing one's anger (and exercising only righteous anger after due consideration) is true valour and prowess, exceeding military skills.

16.33. It looks like chance and we do, indeed, speak of a lottery. But where there was not the skill to determine by providence, or the faith to determine by prayer, or two imponderables were to be decided between, the lot was permitted. It was under the direct care of the Lord to ensure the correct falling out of the decision. Such an important matter as the replacement among the apostles for Judas Iscariot was decided in this way, Acts 1. 15-26. The apostles "gave forth their lots" (verse 26) but the Lord revealed which of the two He had chosen (verse 24). All providences are of the Lord's disposing. Yet in this matter it did not rule out the apostles selecting two names and giving forth their lots. The "whole" disposing thereof is of the LORD.

Proverbs 17

17.1. Quietness and strife are here contrasted. Though it is as old as history (Cain and Abel), continual strife is a most miserable and debilitating business, especially in the home. It will eventually be its undoing as all the relationships within it become fractured. Abundance does not ensure peace in the family. But though a family have

not much more than a crust of bread the constant expressions of love and kindness within it make it a happy place where all obstacles can be surmounted.

17.2. The servant of Christ, though he be of the meanest origin, shall be promoted to rule. “Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Of a truth I say unto you, that he will make him ruler over all that he hath” (Luke 12. 42-44).

17.3. If silver and gold were not inanimate, the fining pot and the furnace would be fierce ordeals. But these metals in the hands of a master craftsman can be perfectly manipulated to give lasting pleasure only by such heat. While the Lord never tempts a believer above what he is able to bear (1 Corinthians 10.13) it is in the heat of life, the furnace of affliction (Isaiah 48.10) that a believer is made fit ultimately for everlasting glory but, in the meantime, that others may see and benefit from the example of the Lord’s own workmanship. “We are his workmanship” (Ephesians 2.10).

17.4. “Naughty” is a word with which we are familiar from childhood! In origin, it means a thing of naught, of no value, worthless. Naughty behaviour, then, is pointless, meaningless and leads nowhere. People only see what they want to see, and hear what they want to hear, by nature. And if their ways are evil they will steer clear of reproof and give heed only to those of like mind. If we catch ourselves exercising the same spirit believers should pull themselves up with a start.

17.5. Whether oppression (14.31) or mockery, as we have seen at the earlier proverb, to denigrate the poor is to cast a slur upon God who made us to be what we are. We should never be pleased when hurtful events overtake others; it is a punishable offence in our Maker’s book.

17.6. Here is a wonderful expression of the happiness of a loving home where the Lord has graciously spared its inhabitants. Grandfathers have lived to see their grandchildren and enjoy them as a signal blessing. The grandchildren themselves honour their parents and vie to be like them, in character if not in career. And the father of the grandchildren, himself the son of grandfather, likewise honours his father. And when all are united in Christ what greater honour can the Saviour bestow upon a family! Its very rarity enhances the honour.

17.7. Wise words would sit most inappropriately upon the lips of a fool, for he does not have the brain behind it to verify his words. It is even more inappropriate for a ruler, a lawmaker, a judge or person in a position of authority to lie. If authority, justice, business or education be founded on a lie the noble values which enrich life and are preserved by truth are driven away and the land becomes a hotbed of dissatisfaction, self-aggrandisement, double-dealing, hatred and ultimately self-destruction.

17.8. The question is whether this proverb is to be taken in a good or a bad sense. A “gift” sometimes means a bribe. “Thou shalt take no gift: for the gift blindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous” (Exodus 23.8). “Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous” (Deuteronomy 16.19). But the use of the expressions “precious stone” and “prospereth” seems to suggest true grace and true prosperity. So in a good sense the picture language evokes the handling of a precious stone which sparkles differently according to which way it is turned in the light and is a constant delight as different colours appear to the view. A gift also recalls the giver with love. The Lord Jesus Christ spoke of believers as being given to Him by His Father six times in John 17 (verses 2,6,9,11,12,24). Believers are precious jewels to Him for the sake of what He has wrought in His people and the light which shines by Him through them into the world and because we are the Father’s gift. But He also speaks in John 17 of giving His people eternal life (verse 2), the words of the Father (verses 8,14) and His glory (verse 22). All precious jewels. Such gifts prosper to the delight of the Godhead, the encouragement of the believer and the blessing of those with whom the believer rubs shoulders.

17.9. We are not talking about a “whitewash” here. Corporate frauds and double dealings are a different matter altogether. It is personal offences and misdemeanours. We are being taught constantly in the Proverbs (10.12; 16.28; 19.11) to overlook faults against us personally and not to reveal the peccadilloes or the failings of others. Peter brings this matter before us again with great emphasis:- “Above all things,” he writes, “have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins” where “charity” is the distinctively Christian word for “love” (1 Peter 4.8). The word “seeketh” in the text does not betray selfishness but an altruistic effort to draw out and win friendship which will be enriching for both parties. If we expose someone’s frailties we embarrass them and it puts a barrier between them and us and between them and those we speak to also.

17.10. This is not to decry corporal punishment but only to remark that a fool will not learn from his mistakes. It needs but a word to cause a wise man to reflect upon his mistake and resolve never to visit that scenario again.

17.11. Intentionally or not, summary justice may be executed by a representative who takes personal offence at a colleague’s dishonesty. A good example, perhaps fresh from David’s recounting of the incident to Solomon, is in the matter of Absalom as recorded in 2 Samuel 18.5-33, though David did not know his own best interests and was too emotionally involved for the common good. However, it is worth noting that such illegal, unilateral action may incur reciprocal justice as it did in the case of Joab. He does not appear in the list of David’s mighty men in 2 Samuel 23 (though two of his brothers and his armour bearer do) and David gives specific instructions to Solomon (1

Kings 2. 1-6) concerning his treatment. It is also recorded that a lifetime's hatred for Solomon's throne was formed in the mind of Hadad through Joab's actions (1 Kings 11. 14-22). At all events we are not to be "cruel" messengers of the gospel but should revere the words of scripture, "LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me" (Psalm 131.1).

17.12. A female bear, enraged at the loss of her cubs, is not more furiously irrational than a foolish man frustrated in the midst of his set purpose. We must not be surprised when the foolish receive the gospel and its messengers with as much hurt as they can inflict.

17.13. If a person delights in evil, and is so accustomed to doing evil, that the only way that kindness can be welcomed is with more evil, then evil's relentless grip will embrace him and his in ever-increasing intensity. The children of that home will follow in those footsteps, though children should always be taught that they do not have to replicate the bad things they come across in their own family situations and that the grace and power of the Holy Spirit can deliver them.

17.14. A burst water main does much damage and is difficult to bring under control. It is a picture of the eruption of strife. It is not so much a "burst" water main as the pressure when a stop cock is unloosed and then can't be turned back against the force of the water. So is the force of contention, because of human nature, that it is best not started. If we stir up trouble we may be letting ourselves in for and making ourselves responsible for much human damage; more than we bargained for and more than we may wish to be responsible for.

17.15. Those who do the opposite of that which is pleasing to the Lord according to His laws, His commandments and His word will meet with His righteous anger in due course. Particularly where justice is concerned. So to make excuses for a wicked course of action in anyone or to find the innocent guilty will not go unpunished. God is God whether we believe in Him or not; so that if we act unrighteously on the basis of unbelief, the visitation will still come.

17.16. Wisdom is no investment other than in our minds and hearts and if there is no heart to learn then it can only be pride to purchase a doctorate, or an education in order to make out that we must be clever because we (or our children) attended such and such a place.

17.17. This proverb is often fulfilled within the natural realm of things but is most supremely fulfilled among brethren in Christ, within Christian friendship. To have loving support in the bleak times, as well as the sunny periods of our lives, acts as a strong foundation undergirding our whole approach to life. Especially it is the very time, when the going is tough and our energies sapped, for brothers to invoke their

best wisdom and advice on our behalf and ensure that we stand firm and that our reactions are true.

17.18. This proverb revisits Proverbs 6.1-5 and the Holy Spirit cautions once again of supporting others with financial help who more than likely cannot be trusted, or have other debts to repay which will have precedence over repayments to us, especially if this overrides the pleadings and good sense of a friend. If the friend who loveth us at all times finds us in this situation, and the brother finds us in such adverse circumstances as suggested here, we do well to take urgent heed. It is a reminder to take the advice of friends and brethren who have our best interests at heart when we are in danger of betraying our livelihoods or even our souls.

17.19. Pride is a transgression that causes strife and the person, whose pride in his family, their affairs and accomplishments is overweening, is inviting trouble and making them a target at the very least for mirth, more likely jealousy and ultimately even violence.

17.20. We speak of those who are “up to no good” and this is a characteristic of those whose hearts are turned away from God. The speech of one whose fundamental way of life is rebellion against God will both cause and receive mischief.

17.21. It is beyond us to know how our children will turn out, or with what characteristics they will be born, but we can influence them to the best advantage by our instruction and good example. If there is no greater disappointment than a foolish or wayward child, it is a wonderful thing to be the evangelist to one who turns out excellently in the faith. “I have no greater joy,” says the apostle John, “than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John 4).

17.22. It is worth comparing this proverb with 15.13. A merry heart acts medicinally to produce a healthy disposition. The sorrowful heart breaks the spirit; and that drieth the bones. Our health fades with the fading of our spirit and leads us into deep troughs. Clearly this proverb is a “wake-up” call to cause us to seek the Spirit’s aid to overcome all forms of oppression and opposition “lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices” (2 Corinthians 2.11).

17.23. When we were considering verse 8 the possibility was raised that it could be interpreted in a bad sense with the word “gift” meaning “bribe.” In this proverb there is no doubt. The wicked person produces his secret weapon, a bribe for those who can “pull strings,” as we say, to overthrow justice or cause a matter to fall to his advantage which may otherwise have dubious merit or be vigorously opposed.

17.24. Alexander the Great and Napoleon thought they could conquer the world and failed. The wise man uses his wisdom to benefit and advise on matters nearer to home. His projects are within reach and sustainable. The foolish man is “airy fairy,” or

entertains grandiose schemes which will not endure serious scrutiny. Let us aim to help our brethren at hand with the means at our disposal waiting upon Christ's wise directions.

17.25. Solomon began this portion of the Proverbs (10.1) with a not dissimilar observation. A foolish boy brings grief and bitterness to the family and, most especially, to his parents. What would our parents think of us if they could see us now? More to the point what does our heavenly Father think of our actions? Mere tomfoolery? Ill-advised? Selfish self-seeking? Wicked? Or would our parents rejoice before the Lord that He had given them such a good son/daughter?

17.26. It is possible that this proverb hearkens back to Solomon's own experience with his brother Adonijah. He was very careful not to punish Adonijah when he had asked for mercy, though he was guilty of treason. Instead he tested him to see if he would show himself to be worthy or wicked and sent him home. He broke curfew, to attempt by underhand means to renew his efforts ultimately to gain the throne and paid for it with his life when Solomon's wisdom saw through his deceit. (It would be good to read 1 Kings 1-2 and trace the outworkings of the early wisdom of Solomon from which we may observe the origins of some of his later proverbs.) Adonijah, on the other hand, struck out at David and Solomon by attacking the monarchy as if right (equity) was on his side.

17.27. The next two proverbs form a couplet; the former from the wise man's perspective and the latter from the foolish. There are situations when the less we say the better. "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5.2). There are situations of grief when listening is the most necessary faculty. There are complex situations when hearing all sides is essential before making reply. A few weighty words, well considered before utterance, is the mark of knowledge. It is not necessary to multiply words to prove a thorough understanding of the matter in hand. The point well grasped and an accurate response is what is required. The fewness of words enables them to be well weighed, considered in many different ways and be of many different applications. The in-word is "cool." And that is precisely the force of the words translated "excellent spirit;" but particularly the sense is that the speaker is not heated or overwrought.

17.28. If the issue is beyond a man and he says nothing, nobody knows what he is thinking and he may do himself a favour (for what it is worth) if men count his silence for sagacity. If we button our lips it will prevent the breaking out of intemperate speech and, if successful, will be to our credit. It may even earn us a reputation, however mistakenly, for skill. Others' high reputation of us may give us breathing space to attain to a greater standard with an accompanying more deserved reputation.

Proverbs 18

18.1. The “desire” spoken of here is not a God-given usefulness of the capacities the Lord has bestowed upon a person. It is rather a desire born of his own inner, but natural, wish. The Holy Spirit repeats themes, as we have seen, so that we may be frequently warned at different points as we read through the Bible. Hence the golden rule of scripture is to compare scripture with scripture (1 Corinthians 2.13). In Jude we have these words, “murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men’s persons in admiration because of advantage. But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; how that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit” (Jude 16-19). The word “lusts” in Jude 16 & 18 is very often translated “desires” and means “heats” or “burnings” of fierce inner compulsions. Jude 19 speaks of men who separate themselves from sound churches to cause others to follow them rather than remain where there is true doctrinal teaching. Our proverb similarly links the desire to serve lusts with this separation from those who, by proclaiming the truth, speak against the toleration of such practices.

18.2. Self-expression is a keynote of education and, within limits, is acceptable. But because of inborn corruption the discovery of the heart will lead to the revealing of sin upon sin. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17.9) We shall never discover the depths of depravity within, and if we attempt to do so we shall just open the floodgates to add sin to sin. It is foolish and leads to that knowledge which is fallen and exemplified by Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2.17) was forbidden to them. It was the serpent who tempted Eve saying, “God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3.5). And what was the great discovery? That they were naked (Genesis 3.7); and in that moment shame hit the human race. Satan knew that that would be the discovery all along. And that it is why it is the fool who seeks to pursue the natural desires of his heart. They will lead to his shameful undoing.

18.3. The rebels against God hold believers in contempt as uneducated and haters of knowledge, because believers exalt faith above mere learning. Any disgrace, any fall from grace, whether in an unbeliever or a believer brings reproach. It is exceptionally sad to a believer to have dishonoured his Lord and self-reproach will cloud his life. David knew reproach, and speaks prophetically of the Saviour also by his own experience:- “For thy sake I have borne reproach; shame hath covered my face...and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me” (Psalm 69. 7,9). The Saviour, unlike David (Psalm 69.5), knew no sin and it was for our transgressions that He was wounded (Isaiah 53.5).

18.4. Words reveal the knowledge of the mind and the reflections of the heart. They come from the depths and, in a man whose meditations are on the word of the Lord, they will impart that which had been hidden beforehand to many and will therefore be of great help to them as they bring to bear on their situations in life things they could never have considered before through ignorance. The second part of the proverb changes the picture, though both halves concern water. A spring of fresh water is pure and can be drunk at source before it gathers impurities; and it never runs dry. Ever fresh goodness is supplied by the word of God Himself in the Bible and the person who is schooled in it will be a constant source of refreshment and reviving to those whose spirits have flagged or who are in any way overwhelmed.

18.5. If a wicked man produces a bribe (17.23) a man of position should not bend to procure his desire for him. Justice should always be aimed for, and be seen to be done. Underhand chicanery will invoke God's anger. If the righteous are brought into great straits because of such miscarriage of justice, so much the more will be the wrath of God upon the perpetrators.

18.6. Do not get involved in issues which do not concern you, is the significance of this proverb, for punishment will be the reward of uncalled for words where there would have been no punishment before.

18.7. This proverb is a couplet with the previous one. In certain circumstances it may be worse than punishment he meets; even death. King Asa spoke foolishly (2 Chronicles 16. 2-3,9) and paid for it in that his land endured warfare and he personally was diseased in his feet. A person may be trapped by words taken down in evidence and used against him. "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth" (Numbers 30.2)." "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better it is that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay" (Ecclesiastes 5. 4-5).

18.8. This proverb revisits the subject of 16.28 and cautions the talebearer against the wounds that are sustained in the heart of the one whose secrets are revealed. It is a malicious talebearing that is meant here. Reporting criminal or seditious words or deeds in the interest of the state is another matter altogether and does not fall into this category at all. But spiteful revelations, or things that were uttered in friendship and then the friendship waned and talebearing became a means of hitting back, these are the sorts of situations covered by this proverb. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Mark 12.31). "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matthew 7.12).

18.9. A lazy person has much in common with a spendthrift, a timewaster or one who thinks nothing of leaving food. It reveals a carelessness with things of value; time, money or property generally. Indeed our throwaway society indicates an endemic carelessness with the earth's resources.

18.10. "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Psalm 14.1; 53.1). The wise person believes in God not in theory only, but actively. He has sufficient faith to turn to the LORD in times of trial and discovers that He does all that, and more than, a strong tower does. A strong tower may collapse (Luke 13.4), but God provides safety. "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4.8).

18.11. However, the wealth of a rich man is not at all dependable. That in which he puts his trust, in contradistinction to the wise believer, is liable to fluctuation and is at the mercy of global forces beyond his control. That same rich man, in common with others, thinks that his own investment portfolio, his own opinion on anything is superior to others and atop this high wall he may perch satisfactorily. But if a wall may fall apart so may all things in which self-opinionated men put their trust.

18.12. Pride and humbleness are here contrasted. There was none so humble as the Lord Jesus Christ. His approach to the city where God had caused His name to dwell (Deuteronomy 12.11) was "meek, and sitting upon an ass" (Luke 21.5). It is very important that believers should learn humility and this theme is repeated in Proverbs (as in 11.2) and throughout the scriptures.

18.13. To have an opinion, and still worse to express it, before making an effort to understand the issues as best one can, is to be exposed to shame when one who really understands the matter speaks decisively, to the satisfaction of right-minded people, on the subject.

18.14. "A wounded spirit who can bear?" The brokenhearted shall be comforted. It is a crucial means of leading to repentance or to the relieving of grief. The Lord heals the brokenhearted. A broken spirit also speaks of a similar experience. But a wounded spirit is another thing altogether. It speaks of damage to the inner being which may display itself in any one of a number of relatively mild depressions to severe psychosomatic illness. At a minor level it is difficult perhaps to be patient. At a more severe level it is difficult to know how to treat. An unharmed and buoyant spirit will keep a person going through all sorts of reverses and when a believer enlists the aid of the Holy Spirit resources become available to secure a passage through the most gruelling situations. Problems become challenges and shameful opposition reasons for joy. When the apostles were beaten for the sake of Christ "they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5.41). The Jewish Christians were urged to "call to remembrance the

former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion on me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance” (Hebrews 10.32-34).

18.15. By mastering and seeking, knowledge is obtained. By welcoming and listening, opportunities for educational attainment avail themselves. If this is the mark of the prudent and wise person, how much more shall the believer long for opportunities to grow in the knowledge of the faith which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

18.16. It is not just bribes that are in mind here. A generous and wealthy benefactor with vast sums at his disposal will have far-reaching acclaim and receive national or even international honours. How much more shall believers make room for the Father, the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1.17) and honour the Saviour who gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4.8) through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12. 8-11)!

18.17. A person may not be so good as he thinks he is and whether under cross-examination in a court of law; a searching viva voce for a doctorate; or simply iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27.17) when a friend tests the validity of his friend’s first principles or assumptions, he will discover he has much to learn and has not yet achieved perfection of understanding. It may be difficult to refute a clever man but if he is an enemy to the gospel the Lord will always raise up one to expose the falsity of his reasoning.

18.18. The Holy Spirit taught us in Proverbs 16.33 that “the lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.” In secular sports and minor matters the toss of a coin is accepted as deciding who goes first or who takes which end - whether or not any advantage is conferred by so doing. In matters of great importance, when there is nothing to choose as far as anybody can see between two people or two courses of action, the jurisdiction of the LORD, who knows all issues better than men and what the future holds in a way they cannot, is obtained by the way in which the lot falls. It is not to be thought of as “chance;” but as an accurate disposition of the Lord’s sovereign will. All alike must abide by this rule. However, a modern lottery is simply gambling and, as a means of obtaining that which is unearned and is taken from others (though by their ill-advised consent), is not a means of guidance but, for most who participate, of poverty.

18.19. While we should not have to be in continual servitude to the strong will of an overweening person, if we do succeed in alienating a former friend or brother or sister in the faith, it will indeed take much longer to win them back than to lose them, if indeed they can be mollified at all. This is military picture language. A well fortified

city may take many months to besiege and the assailants may not succeed in taking it but have to retreat emptyhanded. A brother offended may well engage in subsequent opposition and it will restrain energy from other work which could be accomplished to deal with his issues. As the scripture says, “if it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12.18).

18.20. This is a reminder of the first part of 12.14. The picture language is straightforward. What goes into the mouth through the lips will satisfy the stomach. The fruit of the mouth and the increase of the lips refers to speech; especially the giving of good advice or the preaching of the gospel or witnessing to the Saviour’s name. Men will repay in ordinary times and help in bad times for the kindness and wisdom they have received and enjoyed.

18.21. John Gill puts it well. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” “Of witnesses, according to the testimony they bear; of judges, according to the sentence they pass; of teachers, according to the doctrine they teach; of all men, who, by their well or ill speaking, bring death or life to themselves and others. Some, by their tongues, by the too free use of them, or falsehood they utter, are the cause of death to themselves and others; and some, by their silence, or by their prudent speech and prevalent intercession, secure or obtain life for themselves and others; yea, judgment at the last day will proceed according to a man’s words, “by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned” (Matthew 12.37). The tongue is the instrument either of a great deal of good, or a great deal of evil. “And they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.” That delight to be talkative; that love to use the tongue, whether in a good or in a bad way, shall accordingly be recompensed; shall enjoy the advantages or disadvantages arising from it.”

In World War 2 there were posters in railway compartments, on stations and in the streets and shops saying, “Careless talk costs lives.” Meaning that spies might overhear and use for enemy advantage our supposedly innocent words and that it was therefore right to be guarded in our speech.

18.22. While it is true that men may do better than they know, the opposite can happen also. The sense is that the finding of a good wife is the making of a man and, though marriage is always and everywhere right (but not always granted), where it is granted it is a mark of the Lord’s favour. To have received such a favour and yet reject the Lord is providing fuel for the Lord’s anger without a doubt.

18.23. It would be good to read Matthew 18.23-35 as an exposition of this proverb. Though the one servant, so far from being rich was in debt to the tune of ten thousand talents, he was in a position of power and superiority over the other servants, one of whom was in a similar plight, but whose debt was comparatively small. He used exactly the same words of pleading to the senior servant as that servant had used to

his lord. But to no avail, although the Lord had been merciful to him. We see from the parable of the Lord Jesus Christ that He will deal mercifully with entreaties and that, therefore, believers should not deal roughly with their fellows.

18.24. Here we have another of the “top ten” proverbs. “A man that hath friends must show himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.” Friendliness both keeps friends and makes friends. Believers should always be welcoming to those who come to their church. In the name of the dear Lord Jesus Christ, of Whom pre-eminently these words, “there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother,” are true. Even the Saviour’s enemies observed Him to be the “friend of sinners” (Luke 7.34).

Proverbs 19

There are twelve proverbs in the Book of Proverbs which commence with the word “better” and seven in the book of Ecclesiastes. In fact, at 21.9; 21.19; 25.24 our translators have added (in italics) the words “It is” otherwise they too would begin with “Better” so I have included them in the following list. They are to be found at:- Proverbs 15.16; 15.17; 16.8; 16.19; 17.1; 19.1; 21.9; 21.19; 25.7; 25.24; 27.10; 28.6. There are additional proverbs which have the same idea but the expression “better” is more hidden in the verse, not so striking in its force, though the contrast is as effective. The Ecclesiastes ones are to be found at:- 4.6; 4.9; 4.13; 5.5; 6.9; 7.2; 7.5; 7.8 where 4.9 has additionally been included (and I might have included one or two others) where the contrast is as clear as if the sentence had begun that way.

Because they are memorable, sometimes witty, and always pithy they are worth learning by heart and, with that in mind, I have listed them below, without commenting. Some I have already commented on, and the others in Proverbs I will comment on when we reach them.

15.16. “Better is little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble therewith.”

15.17. “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.”

16.8. “Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right.”

16.19. “Better it is to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.”

17.1. “Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife.”

19.1. “Better is the poor that walketh in his integrity, than he that is perverse in his lips, and is a fool.”

21.9. “*It is better to dwell in the corner of a housetop, than with a brawling woman in a wide house.*”

21.19. “*It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman.*”

25.7. “...better it is that it be said unto thee, Come up hither; than that thou shouldest be put lower in the presence of the prince whom thine eyes have seen.”

25.24. “*It is better to dwell in the corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman and in a wide house.*”

27.10. “...better is a neighbour that is near than a brother far off.”

28.6. “Better is the poor that walketh in his uprightness, than he that is perverse in his ways, though he be rich.”

It is noticeable that some themes recur. The longest one (25.7) is alluded to by the Lord Jesus Christ at Luke 14. 8-11.

In Ecclesiastes we find:-

4.6. “Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.”

4.9. (mentioned in the introduction above) “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.”

4.13. “Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished.”

5.5. “Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.”

6.9. “Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire.”

7.2. “*It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.*”

7.5. “*It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.*”

7.8. “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.”

These are instructions that the Lord Jesus Christ would have us know to walk in wisdom, seeing that He has been made by God to be our wisdom (1 Corinthians 1.30). To this end, as we have seen, He alludes to Proverbs 25.7.

Now, then, to return to Proverbs 19.1. If there is any form of perversion in a person's heart it will reveal itself through the lips. It is foolishness unto him (1 Corinthians 2.14). Better to be genuine and straightforward, though poor.

19.2. We regard it as a priority to feed our minds with knowledge but many are reticent about feeding the soul. Reading the Bible feeds the soul. Hearing the preaching of the Gospel and the Bible explained feeds the soul. Worshipping God through Jesus Christ our Lord feeds the soul. Observing the Lord's Day to do these things provides the foundation for feeding the soul. To get ourselves involved in any activity without due consideration for our soul's welfare is ill-advised haste.

19.3. "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child" (22.15) and the child is the father of the man. If we grow up unrestrained, mentally, morally, or physically, we shall do that which is right in our own eyes and resist the instruction that would be good for us. A badly made yoke, or a well-made yoke made to fit two unequally matched animals, causes rubbing, which expresses much the same idea as fretting. The Lord Jesus Christ says, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11. 28-30). No fret.

19.4. The unwise will interpret this proverb to be an encouragement to pursue wealth. The wise will interpret it to teach them to be friendly and neighbourly to the poor without discrimination.

19.5. This is such an important theme, seeing that the natural bent of the heart is to deceive or conceal, in short to lie, that we need to be often counselled not to be tempted to bear false witness to suit our own situation. This theme was first taken up at 6.19 where a false witness is described as one of the things the Lord hates.

19.6. There is nothing wrong with seeking favour but everything wrong with attempting to bribe. The Lord cannot be bribed, but He acts with grace (a synonym for "favour") towards those who seek His mercy. An earthly prince may limit his favours. The Lord God is bountiful with them to those who ask aright, in sincerity and truth.

19.7. If the unregenerate act like this, how much more should the believer not do so! Job cried out, "Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends" (Job 19.21 – and the whole passage Job 19. 7-28 is worth re-reading at this time.) Let us not turn a deaf ear to the afflicted. James also speaks to this theme (James 2. 15-16), "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, and be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?"

19.8. This verse is a revision, a reminder, of the early chapters about getting wisdom. At no point in our lives should we neglect to add the things which promote the soul's growth. "...giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1. 5-8).

19.9. Virtually the same as 19.5. If the veiled threat of "shall not escape" (19.5) escapes the false witness, "shall perish" will surely bring it home, if he takes heed at all.

19.10. Though it sometimes happens that a servant usurps the monarchy it is such a reversal of what is wholesome that it forms powerful picture language here. If a fool shows delight in something, it is not likely to be in that which is genuinely wholesome. The unsavoury story of Abimelech in Judges 9 is an illustration, for Abimelech though one of many brethren was the son of a servant girl (Judges 9.18). Judges 9 is worth re-reading for the sake of the force of one of the few Old Testament parables, which it contains.

19.11. This is the most elegant language to describe a noble virtue. Sins committed against us do not have to be dealt with in anger, self-righteousness or revenge. Our "pound of flesh" does not have to be demanded to make satisfaction. It is a mark of the highest character to overlook a transgression. Whatever hurt was inflicted is borne bravely and banished. In face of injustice or any consideration which might stir up wrath, it is wise to put it aside; temporarily if justice demands it, permanently if forgivable and unrepeatable, entirely at his discretion. "Wisdom is justified of her children" (Matthew 11.19) and he is free, and wise, so to act. The Lord Jesus Christ bids us to have compassion as He has had pity upon us and to forgive every one his brother their trespasses from the heart (Matthew 18. 33,35).

19.12. The gentle distilling of the dew upon the earth is a frequent abundant renewal of the earth. This is what the favour of a king imparts to a favoured citizen, and this is how the King of Kings imparts the bread of life continually to the believer. To have angered the king is to be as apprehensive as any who hear the fearsome roar of a lion aroused. "God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day" (Psalm 7.11).

19.13. The first part of this proverb is not dissimilar to others we have met (10.1; 15.20; 17.21; 17.25 – see how often we have to revise it!) but its being linked to a foolish wife is new. It is good for a husband and a wife to keep each other on the narrow way that leads to life but it can happen that a mother has so often to check the children, perhaps in a multitude of little things, that it becomes second nature to her to spread this demeanour into other relationships and situations increasingly frequently that it

even intrudes into the matrimonial relationship. It drips away and little by little erodes patience, confidence and even affection.

19.14. It is not wrong to come into an inheritance; it is the managing of it that shows whether the heir is worthy or not. Many do not have a physical inheritance, but we all have inherited traits. What we enter into becomes the data of our lives, and from this we work out our salvation (Philippians 2.12). Even “our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4. 17-18). Though this couplet is not exactly parallel, its diversity heightens the one thing verse 14 does have in common with the previous verse and that is the mention of “wife.” The prudence that she has learned is from the Lord, and a wise wife is the gift of God.

19.15. Laziness is a very difficult habit to break and is best overcome in childhood. The welfare state may disguise the hunger but there is an inherent dissatisfaction at times in the lazy heart none the less. If we do not nurture our souls then that which is the most important part of our very natures will starve and shall perish by default in everlasting destruction.

19.16. When a lawyer said to the Lord Jesus Christ, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asked him what was written in the law. To which he replied with an excellent summary of the 10 commandments, which Jesus commended, Himself replying, “This do, and thou shalt live.” But, of course, the thing is impossible. We cannot keep them all the time and so they fail to bring us eternal life. They are a good guide to life and are as a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, Who alone fulfilled all the law and therefore alone merited eternal salvation. Our salvation is through faith in Him. For the believer the Saviour has given a new commandment that we love one another (John 14.17). To be heedless both of the ordinary rules of life and the way of eternal salvation is death.

19.17. One of the biographies of the missionary Jim Elliot is entitled, “He is no fool.” It is taken from his favourite saying, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” When a believer gives what cannot be repaid as unto the Lord, the Lord will see to it that gain (not necessarily financial) will come of it to his soul’s welfare and nothing that he needs (as distinct from what he might like) will be withheld.

19.18. It may not suit the modern methods, which raise feral children as likely as not, but corporal punishment (of course, within measure) is commended in the Bible. Swiftly administered and swiftly over it is in that respect better than the long drawn out system of reprimands.

19.19. A furious person with a vicious temper has to be restrained by punishment else the temper will never be curbed, and, even then, it is often with great difficulty.

19.20. It is a privilege to grow wise with years and if the elderly cannot do many things they once did, they can dispense wisdom and thus influence the next generations for good. Their words will often be welcomed, especially by grandchildren and great-grandchildren. There is a time for accumulating wisdom, never a time for not assimilating it and old age is especially a time for dispensing it.

19.21. This is a famous and memorable proverb. From it have come the words, "Man proposes but God disposes." A person's bright ideas may not be so bright; or may be at the wrong time; or, as with David in the matter of building the Temple, he may be the wrong person. It is what God intends which counts. And His purpose and counsel shall stand. Nowhere is it more important to believe this than in the matter of the purposes which Almighty God has vested in Christ (Ephesians 1. 9-12).

19.22. God is generous in his assessment of kind thoughts (2 Corinthians 8.12) and will outstrip our intended kindness by His own kindnesses, as He did with David (2 Samuel 7.11 – "Also the LORD telleth thee that he will make thee an house"), commending him that he did well that it was in his heart to build the Temple (1 Kings 8.18). If, being poor, we cannot be lavish with our contributions we may still in our poor way show kindness. We should neither pretend what we haven't done nor exaggerate what we have.

19.23. Not that being citizens of earth we shall not experience evil; even Christ knew man's evil to bear it for His people. To be visited with evil means that it shall adhere to us and be enjoined upon us, given over, even, to it. A believer, "though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down" (Psalm 37.24). "They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures" (Psalm 36.8).

19.24. This is, perhaps, the most comic of the proverbs. Oh! it is so hard, while he yawns (which is surely harder) to be bothered even to eat. Yet it is deadly serious. The lazy person doesn't work and therefore is not entitled to eat. More to the point he becomes incapacitated for work, and reduced supplies mean a reduced stomach and the desire to eat is atrophied too.

19.25. We have met the scorner before in 9.8. A scorner is best avoided. "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful" is how the Book of Psalms begins (Psalm 1.1). The contrary truth is also the same as that which is taught in 9.8 that reproof bestowed upon a wise man will increase his store of wisdom.

19.26. “Wasteth” means to “lay waste”, to be a wastrel, that is to demolish in a spendthrift way the estate, the resources of his father. The prodigal son is an instance of this, “Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me...and not many days after the younger son...wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all...he began to be in want (Luke 15. 12-14). To chase away may involve physical banishing from his presence but essentially means the undermining of all the values his mother had taught him over many years.

19.27. This is the heartfelt plea of a father to a wayward son. It is the plea of our Heavenly Father, delivered by the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the wayward children of men.

19.28. Here we see combined two strands which we have met before, that of the false witness and the scorner. Indeed, a false witness by definition scorns justice and this proverb spells out the iniquity which the false witness might not have spotted, that he is a scorner and that he scorns one of the most basic rights of man, that of justice. Surely this should convict him of his sin and lead him to repentance. Much is condensed into the second part of the proverb. By the mouth we eat; by the mouth we speak. With wicked words an evil person destroys, by eating up, what is good. This element of the thought is omitted; inferred. What he actually does is gulps down evil upon evil, feeding himself upon it with no taste whatever for what is good. “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Philippians 4.8).

19.29. The judicial system in a rightly ordered society is to punish sin. The judge decides on guilt and where it is necessary appoints the decreed punishment for scorners and fools. The punishment officers inflict it. “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of them that do well” (1 Peter 2. 13-14). In heaven, where there is no sin, there will be no need of such instruction or such punishment.

Proverbs 20

20.1. The Bible does not actually forbid drinking wine but it does speak of temperance, that is self- control (Galatians 5.23), as a fruit of the Spirit. It instances Noah (Genesis 9.21) who “began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: and he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent.” It led to shame and awoke prurience in Ham for which he and his descendants were cursed. The prophet Isaiah declares, “they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are

swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment” (Isaiah 28.7). It is very definitely unwise to be unfit for work through strong drink especially if our labour bears responsibility for people’s lives as a judge or people’s souls as a priest.

20.2. The fear which the powers that be instil may be terrifying if enforced with physical abuse. A low profile is the best response in such circumstances and great care is required to ascertain clearly the Lord’s will before believers declare to the faces of those that persecute them for their faith which is in Christ Jesus, “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4.19-20). There is also the command, “When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another” (Matthew 10.23) and to know which course of action to take in perilous times will certainly be revealed - but to the humble, not the rash zealot.

20.3. Perhaps Solomon had in mind his father David who, “when...the LORD had given him rest round about from all his enemies” (2 Samuel 7.1,11) conceived the idea of building the Temple; but God said to him, “Thou shalt not build an house for my name, because thou hast been a man of war, and hast shed blood” (1 Chronicles 28.3). If David had rest from his enemies as a public figure, how much more shall it be an honour to a private individual to cease from private strife. Meddling where there is no need to, and no right, stirs a hornet’s nest and it will be the worse for the one involved.

20.4. We have met lazybones in 13.4. but as he is such a familiar figure, and could be insidiously disguised as ourselves, so he is brought to our attention again by the Holy Spirit. It may be too cold for him personally but his excuse will probably be that the ground is too hard for ploughing. Just as we are to sow beside all waters (Isaiah 32.20) so we are to work in all weathers.

20.5. The first part of this proverb is a reminder of 18.4. The wise heart is pictured as being like a well. Whether it is the counsellor who draws out of his own wise heart, or the one seeking advice who elicits the help, it is in any case good to be in receipt of excellent advice and good to give it.

20.6. The Lord Jesus Christ takes up this theme, “When thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men” (Matthew 6.2). “Have it to thyself before God,” (Romans 14.22) is spoken of about faith but the principle extends to every deed that should be exercised in faith. So that the one who exercises his faithfulness, keeping it as much as possible between himself and God, is comparatively rare, and we should endeavour to be such ourselves.

20.7. Whether simply natural justice or, better still, the man who is righteous in God's sight, it is for that person to be consistent with his profession. If he/she is, then the children will follow suit for there is that in integrity which is persuasive and winsome as it issues from absolute standards of truth.

20.8 If that person is a monarch or has power he has only to look and that will frighten away all evildoers and even prevent them from pursuing their evil from afar. We do not see the Lord, and therefore it must be a powerful inward spiritual impulse to enable a person to apprehend that "look."

20.9. Everyone must have the eyes cast down in the presence of the King of kings for, tested by ultimate standards, none can stand before Almighty God. It is the deceitfulness of relativism, that is comparing ourselves favourably with others who are worse than ourselves, to make us think that we are better off than we are. We must judge ourselves by God's standards and according to the requirements of His commandments and accordingly apply for mercy in Christ.

20.10. Again, absolute standards are the subject here. Double standards, changeable dealings are hateful to the Lord who loves absolute justice. It is not acceptable to the living God, who changes not, that there should be one standard for one and another for another, or differing standards according to time and place.

20.11. This is another famous proverb. The proverb means that all adults and teenagers are known by their doings, whether pure and right. It is so far true as to be true of children "even." How many young people growing up have a reputation for purity? For loving only what is right? How many adults? This is not a proverb to insist on a certain standard of behaviour for children in isolation from later on in life. It is the opposite of the "don't do as I do, do as I say" mentality. We are all known by God, who knows us altogether, as to whether our work is pure and right. If we are convicted of sin in this regard by the Holy Spirit, then we should not delay to apply for mercy to the Lord Jesus Christ, repenting as we confess our sins to Him.

20.12. The most succinct comment on this is Psalm 94.9. "He that planted the ear, shall he not hear?" he that formed the eye, shall he not see?" This has been a group of proverbs about the absoluteness of God in all His ways and that mankind would be wise to conform to them absolutely.

20.13. We have met this theme before, because we all know times when we don't want to get out of bed and for some this is an endemic failing. As the hymnwriter says, "the daily round, the common task will furnish all we ought to ask."

20.14. Here the picture language takes us to market. We have something to sell. "It's not worth much", says the dealer and if the seller is not satisfied he goes elsewhere and finds that, for the most part, all buyers say the same. But the dealer sees his

chance for profit, and when he has duped the seller he boasts about the “treasure” he has got so cheaply. A fair price and open dealing is the requirement of the Lord.

20.15. There is gold, and there are rubies, but then again there is the teacher of wisdom and the scripture knows which is to be preferred and advises us accordingly.

20.16. Here is an oft recurrent theme, an urgent matter, against which the Holy Spirit would warn His people. Where there is a combination of a wastrel or spendthrift and a relatively poor society this is a frequent temptation. The Spirit teaches us throughout this book – at 6.1; 11.15; 17.18 and it is going to occur twice more 22.26-27; 27.13. Envisage three parties. The man in financial difficulties. His friend. The lender. The lender receives from the friend a valuable item of clothing as pledge for the repayment of the money loaned. It would, of course, be worth more than the money lent. This scripture tells us that, such is human nature, the man will almost certainly default and that, as we say, the friend might as well “kiss goodbye” to his possession.

20.17. This is powerful picture language. It reminds us of 9.17, “Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.” “Bread” stands for all sorts of food, and even for “earnings” as when we speak of “earning our bread” or “earning our corn.” If you have ever eaten sandwiches on a sandy beach you will fully understand most of the force of the imagery. The part of the picture which the sand does not, perhaps, quite bring out is the “afterwards.” As we might say, in addition it leaves a nasty taste in the mouth. Here then is a picture in any walk of life of ill-gotten gains being gloated over and then conscience strikes for a far longer period than the enjoyment lasted. Another hymnwriter speaks of “pleasures that can never cloy” and this is quite the opposite.

20.18. This is a proverb that is always and everywhere true. Even our heavenly Father in the counsels of eternity, as we say, “deliberated” with the other Persons of the Trinity. Church officers, in particular, should not act unilaterally. To be able to give and receive good and sound advice in any situation is invaluable and is something everyone should aim to achieve. Much depends on attitude and manner, winsomeness and persuasiveness, as well as the substance of the advice if good counsel is to be acceptable.

20.19. There is much “revision” in this chapter. Here we revert to the theme of 11.13 and 18.8. Talebearing in a child and gossip in an adult are much the same except that the latter is more reprehensible. Those with time on their hands may well be afflicted by this malady but it may also be a character defect which needs to be addressed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He is willing to do so, else we would not have His frequent pleadings in this book. Flattery opens us up to unguarded speech, to say nothing of giving us false ideas about our own importance. We must be on guard.

20.20. Here is disobedience to the 5th commandment (Exodus 20.12), the first commandment with promise (Ephesians 6.2), “Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.” All promises have to be “claimed” (Ezekiel 36.37 – “I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them”). We have so much of our parents in us: our very characteristics are inherited, though selected for us by the Lord. Even if our parents were not perfect we must honour them for these things at least, and by obedience while we are under age. Now, cursing goes much further. It speaks of an aggressive rejection and qualifies the perpetrator for the loss of the length of days spoken of in the commandment. More than that “they die obscure” (as Milton says of those who are atheists) lonely, unheralded and without hope unless they repent while there is yet time.

20.21. Again, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15. 11-32) is the best commentary on this verse. It does have a happy ending, in the sense of a salvaged one, but not in the matter of the inheritance which was forfeited.

20.22. “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12.19). That itself is a repetition of Deuteronomy 32.35, “To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence.” In Hebrews 10.30 it is written, “Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord.” Mankind is apt to hit back harder than the injury received and if sin is not to be added to sin, injury to injury, it must be left to the all-righteous God in justice and in mercy to deal with our real or supposed wrongs. He alone knows how to evaluate them and how to proportion, as well as apportion, blame. “Wait on the LORD, and he shall save thee” is a very succinct summary. If we nurse a sense of grievance, plead this promise that He will put it right.

20.23 also has another succinct conclusion, “a false balance is not good.” Again, this is no new theme; we had it as recently as verse 10. Such pithy words, much in little, enable us to encapsulate the whole matter in our thinking. If we have been mis-sold or cheated we may plead these words before the LORD who, as specified in the previous proverb, will repay.

20.24. Perhaps this is one of the most far-reaching of all proverbs for it presumes a whole approach to life. All we have and are – our family tree, our own personal makeup, the times in which we live, our location, our wealth or poverty, our education – these are all of the Lord. It follows that not to believe in the Lord is to walk in darkness. But even in the fully committed believer there is much that he/she does not understand. A sin which we never knew was lurking there in our character may suddenly surface. “That’s not like me,” we think. But it is like us. It’s the first time it’s surfaced, but it was always there waiting. What we do not understand, we should daily commit to the Lord, for “all things work together for good to them that love God, to

them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8.28). Contrary events are an especial vexation, so we must commit them most especially to the Lord.

20.25. The best commentary on this proverb is Malachi 3.8-10. “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse...and prove me now herewith...if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.” A rash vow may perhaps come under this heading when the votary scrabbles about to find a way to be loosed of a vow which he cannot keep and which he did not have to make. The expression “devoureth” suggests rather the robbing of temples or sequestering church funds and then seeking to cover it up by a feigned investigation. Maybe Romans 2.22 “thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege?” is also an interpretation of this proverb, where it is envisaged that one who would never dream of worshipping idols feels quite happy in cheating God, “devouring” in that sense, as per Malachi 1.7-8.

20.26. Here is a powerful expression, that one might have thought would have become a proverb in the English language, but hasn’t – to bring the wheel over someone. The picture is of a chariot ploughing through the enemy in a field of battle. So will a wise ruler deal peremptorily with ungodly opposition if his rule is to survive. So must we deal with wicked thoughts.

20.27. The enlightened spirit which is in man is His Holy Spirit, deep calling unto deep (Psalm 42.7), the Spirit itself bearing witness with our spirit (Romans 8.16), shining in the inner life to bring to light hidden wickedness that it may be disposed of. “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139. 23-24).

20.28. Psalm 45.4 sings prophetically of King Jesus that He rides prosperously “because of truth and meekness and righteousness, traits of the King of Kings but by no means of all in authority.” In Christ, “mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Psalm 85.10) and this is why His people fall under Him; love Him.

20.29. “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 9.23-24). “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought

things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence” (1 Corinthians 1. 27-29). There is a happy progression in this proverb. The young man’s strength fails little by little, or, if wounded or he meets with an accident, suddenly. But he is wise if, in seeking God in Christ, he pursues wisdom which will adorn him; as a man prudent in his own doings, and as a counsellor and example to others in old age.

20.30. One design of corporal punishment, vividly expressed for effect (but not intended absolutely literally for stripes are not on the belly nor is it the severity, the blueness which accomplishes the design) is to be a powerful deterrent to evil whether the punishment is observed in another or received in one’s own body. It is designed to deal with the innermost thoughts and motives and we are wise if we learn from our mistakes before we have to learn from the punishment of those errors. There is a worse than corporal punishment, as Paul writes, “and...men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet” (Romans 1.27). “God gave them over also to a reprobate mind” (Romans 1.28). But it is always the inwardness of our errors of which the Holy Spirit desires to make us aware and from which He lives to free us, for our perfection is the ultimate aim. “The LORD will perfect that which concerneth me: thy mercy, O LORD, endureth for ever: forsake not the work of thine own hands” (Psalm 138.8).

Proverbs 21

21.1. King Solomon, from his own experience, here gives his testimony of the power and glory of the King of kings. Whether the king be willing or unwilling, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth (Revelation 19.6) even in the heart of one whose natural inclination is most mightily to oppose Him. So it was with Pharaoh before Solomon’s time and Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus afterwards. Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the Lord (Daniel 4.37), Cyrus did not (Isaiah 45.4) but, for all that, the King of kings did have his way. Every monarch, every ruler shall likewise succumb willingly or unwillingly to His sway. The courses of mighty rivers may be turned, lesser streams tumble hither and thither and these are pictures of the invisible influences within the heart of a king. Mighty affairs of state which direct the history of nations are so influenced. The King of kings is no less able, and no less active, in directing the hearts of all people. And, in the hearts of believers, The Saviour is “the head over all things to the church which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all” (Ephesians 1. 22-23).

21.2. The writing on the wall convicted Belshazzar, “Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting” (Daniel 5.27). We have already read (16.2), “the LORD weigheth the spirits.” It is picture language again, for “pondereth” derives from a Latin word meaning “weight” as in “ponderous” and “pound.” So the Lord not only weighs

our actions but evaluates them and pronounces a verdict upon them as in Daniel 5.27. Of course, we think we're right; and a sincere person will only take a course of action if he/she believes in the rightness of it. But, still, it may not be right. There are many imponderables which we cannot fathom; furthermore, "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17.9) and, with the best of intentions, we may not know the concealed motives of our own hearts. Rather than always insisting that our ways are right, it is wise constantly to submit them at every stage to the guidance of the Lord.

21.3. A person may fulfil all the requirements of religious service externally but, by unfair or uncharitable dealings with people, be totally unacceptable to God. It would be a good time now to reflect on the Saviour's instructions by reading Matthew 6. The Saviour also said, "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift (Matthew 5.23-24).

21.4. Pride, however it shows itself, is hated by God. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11.29). "Ploughing" may be understood in two ways here. It could be a part of the activities of life put to represent the whole, as if it was said that every activity of the sinner is sin, simply because he is unrepentant before God. Or, just as we use the picture that someone "ploughed right on regardless" to describe insensitivity and the riding roughshod over people's affairs and feelings, it may refer particularly to the hurt which a proud person causes to the feelings of others.

21.5. "Diligence" and "hastiness" are contrasted. "Hastiness" includes what we would now call acting in haste, without due consideration or study, or weighing up the pros and cons. But it may also denominate simple carelessness. Either way it does not achieve success. The bedrock of achievement is care; giving time and thought to all the issues and involvements of our lives.

21.6. This is quite a complicated proverb which needs some unravelling. To obtain wealth (or promotion, or any other aim) by lying is to be in breach of the 9th commandment for that commandment equates any lie as hurting a neighbour quite as much as specifically bearing false witness. If in breach of one of God's commandments then we are under the condemnation of Almighty God. "Vanity", which is the theme of Ecclesiastes - "vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (1.2) - means emptiness, meaninglessness. Ecclesiastes describes the condition of one (like Solomon) who has backslidden and therefore finds that nothing seems to be working together for good. It describes the state in which a person may find himself which will lead to destruction if unrepented of and, in any case, will minimise fruitfulness of character while it lasts. So, unless wealth so obtained is forfeited, willingly or regretfully, there can be no

ultimate benefit obtained through it. The tossing to and fro is most likely a picture of rough seas, as in Psalm 107. 25-27; it could remind us of the tossing of a ball, but actually that is not a picture ever used in the scriptures. Taking the picture of stormy waves we are being told by the Holy Spirit that ill-gotten gains are liable to be affected, diminished by every vicissitude of life and that we may feel too “seasick” to take any pleasure in them much of the time. They are not worth having, in other words. To all this is added the declaration that involvement in such ambitions is a death sentence, without repentance. It will greatly incur the wrath of God, partly because of how such treat others and also how they are snubbing God. In summary it is a positive embracing of certain destruction; those who seek false achievement seek death.

21.7. It is the act of commitment to a course of robbery, burglary or thieving; or even a single attempt, which is that person’s downfall because it is a statement of intent to be lawless and to despise the legitimate acquisitions of law-abiding citizens. It is, in effect, to despise work (which God has ordained in Genesis 3.19) and law and order which the laws of God command.

21.8. Paul writes to Titus (Titus 1.15-16) “Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.”

21.9. Here we are, back with one of the “It is better...” proverbs. Love, peace and contentment in the married life even with much shortage and sacrifice is better than abundance of lifestyle with constant argument and rancour.

21.10. Proverbs 3.29 instructed us, “Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee.” The wicked will seek to commit evil wherever it suits him and he will make no exception of his neighbour, maybe finding him to be an even easier prey.

21.11. It is one of the aims of punishment that those who are in danger of doing the same thing should be put off. Whatever form instruction takes a wise person learns from it. He learns from his mistakes; he learns from assimilating facts; he learns by reflection upon life and in many other ways also.

21.12. The best that a wise person can do, for the most part, when he observes entrenched evil is to learn to avoid every appearance of evil himself. God however is in a position to do something about it and, whether sooner or later, will destroy it. Read Psalm 37.9; 73.17-20.

21.13. James writes by the Holy Spirit (2.15-16) “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the

body; what doth it profit?" The possibility seems to be envisaged in which a whole church may be so complacent that it does not heed the cry, or is oblivious to the need, of even poor fellow believers.

21.14. We are used to training dogs and rewarding them with gifts; we deal with our children somewhat similarly. Even adults need such encouragement, but would be shy if it were publicly or indiscreetly shown. We give tips in restaurants. Such encouragement is not a bribe. But there is a fine line between legitimate encouragement and a bribe. It is probably easiest to distinguish the difference in this way. If we reward completed action it is all in order. If we reward in order to stimulate action, especially improper action, it is a bribe.

21.15. It gives real pleasure to fulfil righteousness in any way and to complete one's work in a proper fashion. The opposite of that joy is a certain fearful looking for of judgment which, however much the hardened sinner denies it, will activate his conscience at unwelcome moments.

21.16. The aimlessness of a person with no interest in understanding anything in any realm of life is to be more dead than alive. That there are many like that is indicated by the description "congregation," though the final gathering of such together from all over the world and at all times of history will not be till the judgment. There is no need to remain in that number. We may all seek the wisdom that is in Christ Jesus the Lord.

21.17. Do we eat to live or live to eat? Here is a proverb about getting our priorities right. Pleasure is a fine foil to labour and should be enjoyed to send us back better fitted and rejuvenated for our life's work. It is not to be a pastime, to while away hours which could be better spent; or to be indulged for its own sake. If our job is boring or repetitive it cannot be worse than the slave's lot, to whom it was written, "whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men" (Colossians 3.23). "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things (that is, necessities) shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6.33). Our wisdom would be to make it our pleasure to seek first the Saviour's kingdom.

21.18. The Spirit of the Lord says, "Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life" (Isaiah 43.4). It would be good to read Joshua 7 at this point, noting especially verses 8 & 26. The sin of Achan prevented the blessing falling on the whole nation. The execution of full punishment meant that the Lord was appeased and His people were able to continue victoriously. Let the sinner beware, particularly the secret sinner.

21.19. Here is another “It is better...” proverb and once again features an unruly woman. Peace and quiet, even in heat and grit, is better to be desired than the constant bickering of bitterness.

21.20. This proverb, while it may be appreciated on a natural level, is best enjoyed on a spiritual. Salvation in Christ and all it entails is the supreme treasure. “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (2 Corinthians 4.6-7). The foolish man lays waste his powers and may, by sponging, diminish the stores of the righteous. This can even happen in a spiritual way when a spiritual person gets involved in some dispute. Let us look “diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled” (Hebrews 12.15). Both the wise and foolish should take heed of the words of the Saviour, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matthew 6. 19-20).

Oil is always a picture of the Holy Spirit and the abundance of His anointing. The sheer abundance of His gifts is illustrated by the lavishness with which the oil was poured upon Aaron, Psalm 133.2. So it is poured upon a believer, especially that he/she may know unity with Christ and with one another; but also there is an abundance of many other graces and gifts. It is that very abundance which is threatened when the Spirit is grieved (Ephesians 4.30). No man, nor Satan’s malice behind men’s evil actions, must rob us of our supply. “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Ephesians 4. 31-32).

21.21. The principle is exemplified and commended by the Lord Jesus Christ in the Beatitudes, (especially in Matthew 5.6-7), “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.”

21.22. A city well defended by a high wall may yet be penetrated unseen by an opponent scaling that wall and opening up the way for his comrades from within the city itself. It is a picture of the way in which a wise person’s advice and manners may secretly overcome, albeit unwillingly at first, the entrenched opinions or purposes of an opponent, establishing doubts within him of the efficacy or rightness of his conduct.

21.23. How often we regret our hasty comment or riposte. We may live to regret giving, as our considered opinion, ill-thought out and un-prayed over advice. Our conscience may trouble us; our stock may have diminished in the eyes of others; but it embroiled us in trouble in one way or another.

21.24. We have been advised constantly in the book of Proverbs about pride and scorn. It is an awful reputation to have to be always angry, to deal in anger, so that no one, even among our colleagues, dares to approach when for the welfare of firm, family or church it is essential. Perhaps Nabal was fresh in Solomon's mind. "Nabal (fool) is his name, and folly is with him." "He is such a son of Belial, that a man cannot speak to him." (1 Samuel 25.25,17). Read the whole chapter as an antidote to such an attitude.

21.25. There is dry humour here. It's all right to be amused if we're thinking of someone else, but clearly the Holy Spirit knows that this is such a method as will stir a lazy one at last. Oh! to own a mansion! Oh! to be the greatest! But without labour these are but dreams; exaggerated dreams, of course, because most who do labour cannot achieve these things. The humour lies in this, that the hands refuse to get involved – as if the hands were not directed by the heart's desire! The desire for reality is not as great as the desire for daydreaming and this is a more common malady than we might suspect, even in our own hearts. Balaam said, "let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" (Numbers 23.10) but it was merely a forlorn hope without living a righteous life, which, of course, he didn't.

21.26. Desire without labour leads to covetousness, a much more serious sin, for it is a breach of the 10th commandment. Greed and jealousy concerning the "haves" and the "have-nots" consume him with no basis in reality, except his own laziness, at all. The righteous work and give unsparingly. It is not meant that they give to the lazy one, though if their lives were threatened or that of their families through poverty, they might. However, the scripture says through the apostle Paul, "this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3.10).

21.27. The Lord loathes it when an unrepentant person makes his/her offering. It is infinitely worse if such a one is actively meditating on the sin in hand, not even heeding the significance of the sacrifice for a moment.

21.28. If proved false, such a witness will be disqualified from future credence. The one who abhors lying and thinks about what he sees will frequently be called upon to testify. The unrepentant liar will perish eternally; but the believer will judge the world and angels too (1 Corinthians 6.2,3).

21.29. A person who wishes to continue in wickedness when confronted by man or convicted by the Spirit will steel himself; the upright will in all matters, even if convinced of his sin, direct his thoughts and actions into truth and honesty.

21.30. Gamaliel rightly cautioned against fighting against God (Acts 5.39), "...if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God."

21.31. We have already considered that "the lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD" (16.33) where there is a proper proportion of the part man plays and the part God plays. We must do something, but God superintends. This proverb is another telling illustration of the same principle. By giving us the different illustration of warfare the Holy Spirit alerts us to another situation in which this whole idea is so important. He awakens us to other situations which we might similarly think of; civil, political, military, business, domestic or private.

Proverbs 22

22.1. To be held in honour because of real worth or to have a good reputation well deserved makes life both pleasant and fruitful. There is similar encouragement in Ecclesiastes 7.1. The apostle John writes, "Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, and we also bear record; and ye know that our record is true" (3 John 12). It is a commendation which elicits trust. His name has been perpetuated down the years to encourage us to be approved also, for the scripture holds him up as an example (3 John 11-12), "He that doeth good is of God...Demetrius hath good report of all men." How many believers have served their generation with all honesty down the years is known only to the Lord; but faith in the Lord Jesus Christ moulds such characters. Where it is possible people like to clear their names if they have been impugned; where it is not possible believers leave it with the Lord who knows the heart. Money can't buy it. And it is to be preferred, should there be a choice, at the expense of an opulent lifestyle.

22.2. That we are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1.26) should give us kind hearts towards our fellow men. That we must all die should keep us from pride.

22.3. David writes (Psalm 57.1), "in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast." Sheltering from a storm is often wise even though we encounter delay. So this is picture language to seek the Saviour's help to see from the scriptures the nature of the storms we may expect. And while life must go on, to hide ourselves in Him. The advice the Saviour gave in Matthew 24.15-22 was heeded during the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and historians have recorded that every believer escaped. The Saviour also advised (Matthew 24.44) "be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." He is "the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (Isaiah 32.2).

22.4. This would not be the commonly accepted, worldly wisdom as the means of obtaining riches, honour and life. But spiritually it is always so. In Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2.3). Paul speaking of the riches

of the Saviour's goodness and forbearance goes on to mention those "who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality" (Romans 2.4,7). "Promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another" (Psalm 75.6-7). Jesus says that true spiritual and eternal life is vested in Him, "I am the life" (John 11.25;14.6).

22.5. The one who turns away from God will frequently find sharp hurts in life and become trapped in constant sins. As they are not pleasant experiences he would be wise to conclude that there is need of a turning back to God who would soothe the hurts and set him free, upon repentance. To seek the daily leading of the Lord will be to give a wide berth to such temptations and habits.

22.6. Here is another celebrated proverb. Training in the ways of the Lord and in every right behaviour is essential for a child for, as we shall see at 22.15, "foolishness is bound in the heart of a child." Left to his own devices a child will inevitably go astray. There are, of course, kind and patient ways of training which Christian parents (the objects themselves of the Saviour's love and mercy) must consistently show. Such principles, standards, words of wisdom will remain for ever and be equally valid throughout the whole of adult life, for the child is the father of the man.

22.7. We live in a society of borrowers so this proverb is a timely reminder. Though we may live in a free society we are ruled over by the rich when we are in debt. The final payment of a heavy mortgage may seem a release every bit as much as the freedom a lifetime slave might have gained after many years' service. The great New Testament lesson is spelled out in Romans 13.7-8. In the midst of all life's indebtedness, show Christian love. "Render...to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. Owe to no man anything, but to love one another."

22.8. The Bible often uses the familiar picture of sowing and reaping. The cycle of the year's crops is well understood. Over the longer period of life it makes a salutary lesson concerning our actions. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. He that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting" (Galatians 6.7-8). Job 4.8 reads "Even as I have seen, they that plough iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same." The relief of the nation at the demise of the king of Babylon and his enforcers is described in Isaiah 14.5-7, "The LORD hath broken the staff of the wicked, and the sceptre of the rulers. He who smote the people in wrath with a continual stroke, he that ruled the nations in anger, is persecuted, and none hindereth. The whole earth is at rest, and is quiet: they break forth into singing." Heaven will be such a relief from earth's cruelties, injustices and oppressions.

22.9. "Bountiful eye" is a wonderful expression. An eye to spot need and to anticipate where help will be required; coupled with a willingness and an ability to provide liberally at one's own expense is all summed up in these brief words. "Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the LORD will deliver him in time of trouble" (Psalm 41.1).

22.10. We have constantly met the scorner in this book of Proverbs, for he is frequently met with in life. He is to be dismissed, at the very least from our own thoughts; and from public office if wisdom is to prevail. Contention, strife and reproach, with all the searchings of heart they cause, are all the results, not to say aims, of the scorner.

22.11. What does the King of kings love to see? Purity. "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matthew 5.8). "Purify your hearts, ye double minded" (James 4.8). Of the Saviour Himself it is written, "Grace is poured into the lips" (Psalm 45.2). No wonder He loves to see it in His children! "They wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth" (Luke 4.22). Therefore "let your speech be always with grace" (Colossians 4.6). Let it be "sound speech which cannot be condemned" (Titus 2.8). "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things" (Matthew 12.35) and that includes the words of his lips. The friendship of the Saviour is to be prized above all things. He has laid down His life for His people. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends" (John 15.13-15).

22.12. Though the Lord is a spirit, He is aware of all things and remembers all things which He observes so as to judge the world. "The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him" (2 Chronicles 16.9). "Doth not he see my ways, and count all my steps?" "His eyes are upon the ways of man, and he seeth all his goings" (Job 31.4; 34.21). Even the wise words of a wise man will be overthrown if he is in transgression, as with Ahithophel (2 Samuel 17.14).

22.13. There may or may not be a lion. It may be prudent, if there is, to delay a while (22.3) but it is more likely to be an excuse when there is no such danger. There is no end to the excuses which a lazybones makes to avoid work.

22.14. Here we revert to the theme of earlier chapters. The strange woman is one who is estranged from God and all good. To be ensnared by such is the fate of those whom God abhors for their sin. The picture is the snare of a deep pit from which it is impossible to escape without help. The Lord will help the repentant sinner who forsakes that which God abhors.

22.15. By nature a child is wrapped up in silly, inconsequential things. Corporal punishment administered appropriately and proportionately in season does more good than mere cautionary words and probably hurts less.

22.16. Micah 2. 1-4 speaks of what God will do (in principle – the specific destruction is not mentioned except that it is the overrunning of the land) to those who annexe the lands of the poor to augment their own. Unless forced to do so, a man is not likely to surrender his possessions to the wealthy, unless he feels that he may gain by making a deal with the rich. It will not be long before the agreement will go by default.

The New Testament teaches us in whatsoever state we are, therewith to be content (Philippians 4.11). It teaches us that “having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Timothy 6.8). The Lord Jesus Christ, presenting Himself before us as the most precious possession of all, bids us be content with such things as we have: “for he hath said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee” (Hebrews 13.5). “They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6.9-10). “Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?” So it is good not to be such.

22.17-21. However much we know it in theory, we always need reminding in the midst of life’s business that we need the Lord’s wisdom and direction at all times. So Solomon pauses in the midst of these sundry subjects to bring us back to the Saviour and His wisdom. Let us learn carefully Christ’s words which bring wisdom and apply them as closely to the detail of our lives as we can. Let us accumulate knowledge, not for head knowledge merely nor to feed pride, but that its application may lead us in green pastures, beside the still waters and in the paths of righteousness (Psalm 23.2-3). Paul writes in Colossians 2.23 of things which demonstrate a mere show of wisdom. The wisdom that is in Christ, and obtained by the scriptures, will keep us from false religions, false prophets, false doctrines (which may seem learned) and every false way.

Wisdom’s ways are ways of pleasantness and peace (3.17). Walking with Christ is a delightful road (Luke 24.13-32). “Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words which I command you this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deuteronomy 6.5-7).

When David says in Psalm 40.10, “I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart” he does not mean that he has not memorised its teachings but that he has publicised them, for he goes on to say, “I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have

not concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the great congregation.” David taught Solomon well, so that he writes “That thy trust may be in the LORD, I have made known to thee this day, even to thee.” Whether through public preaching in the sanctuary, or by the private reading of the Bible, the Lord has graciously provided pleasant and life-giving instruction.

Luke in the introduction to his gospel (Luke 1.4) writes, “that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed”. He is echoing Solomon’s words of verse 21, “that I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth.” We need to be founded on truth, for that is certainty. If our instruction has been in the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ and his scriptures how blessed we are! This verse is also echoed in 1 Peter 3.15, “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.” The Proverbs are addressed to his son (2.1;3.1;5.1;6.1;7.1) and to all the children of men (4.1) and in this pause Solomon summarises, “have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge?” It is therefore a good time to revise and consider what we have attained now, that we didn’t know before we started.

22.22-23. This couplet revisits verse 16. We are not to take advantage of a person’s vulnerability. “For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the LORD; I will set him at safety from him that puffeth at him” (Psalm 12.5). And, if we are the oppressed, we may claim that help. This is beautifully expressed in Psalm 68.18 concerning the Saviour’s victory over all the powers of evil, “Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive.” Jeremiah 30.16-17 spells out the same truth, so needful to those who are oppressed and might be tempted to forget that, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12.19).

22.24-25. Anger and fury are contagious – caught by contact. Believers are not to join forces with protestors and zealots even to resist an opposition which they have in common. Pilate and Herod were made friends, united against Christ, when they had been previously at enmity (Luke 23.12). It doesn’t bode well.

22.26-27. Again, we have frequently met this theme beginning with 6.1. We may be required to pay up at the most difficult of times and lose even basic necessities such as our very bedding.

22.28. The law enjoined, “Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour’s landmark (that is, his boundary hedge or fence, or markers), which they of old time have set in thine inheritance.” “Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour’s landmark” (Deuteronomy 19.14; 27.17). It was a great sin in Ahab and Jezebel to confiscate Naboth’s vineyard and put him to death (1 Kings 21.4 – but read the whole chapter). The full extent of this injunction is covered by the 10th commandment, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his

maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's" (Exodus 20.17). Our neighbour is defined (Luke 10.29-37) as anyone with whom we come in contact.

22.29. In any occupation the careful and diligent businessman, tradesman, professional or labouring man will achieve expertise which will cause him to be sought after. He may receive a royal warrant or land an excellent contract or just be appreciated by his employer. There is a brilliant turn of phrase to describe this matter in Deuteronomy 28.13, "the LORD shall make thee the head, and not the tail." The verse continues, "and thou shalt be above only, and thou shalt not be beneath; if that thou hearken unto the commandments of the LORD thy God."

Proverbs 23

23.1-3. The train of thought now begins to be rather more extended than in recent chapters. This triplet speaks to us about appetite. The gratification of any of our lusts is an unbecoming spectacle and those who see us greedily going about our pet habits will downgrade us in their estimation. That is not a good Christian witness. Those who are in authority may take advantage of our evident weakness for their own ends. We have all heard of spies entrapped by spies of the opposite sex engaged in counter espionage. There are indeed very dangerous, if not deadly, situations to which we may be thus exposing ourselves. The Saviour's servants should not be sitting at table with Satan's servants and putting themselves at risk by being indebted to them.

23.4-5. As we have already seen, and it needs to be often repeated, "they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition" (1 Timothy 6.9). It was the folly of the rich young ruler (Mark 10.17-25) that though he valued eternal life enough to beseech for it, if it was going to be at the cost of his wealth and the position which his wealth entailed, it could only take second place. And though he was in touching distance of the Saviour's love (Mark 10.21) he rejected it in favour of continuing in his wealthy lifestyle. Wealth and honour is indeed a heady mixture!

All the media advertise and exalt the trappings of wealth and encourage getting rich. This is what is meant by man's wisdom, "thine own" wisdom. It is marvellous picture language which challenges us not to set our eyes on that which is not, in the sense that it soon vanishes; as speedily as an eagle makes off with its prey. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6.19-21). Psalm 49 also warns us severely (16-20), "Be not thou afraid when one is made rich, when the glory of his house is increased; for when he dieth he shall carry nothing

away: his glory shall not descend after him. Though while he lived he blessed his soul: and men will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself. He shall go to the generation of his fathers; they shall never see light. Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish.”

23.6-8. Jesus said (Mark 7.21), “out of the heart of men proceed evil thoughts...an evil eye...” He also asked the question, in a parable, of those who murmured saying, “Is thine eye evil, because I am good?” The reference is to jealousy and envy; it might also include those who look upon others to trap them or destroy them, for whatever reason. Christians are urged not to get closely involved with such for the trap will surely be sprung. As the little bit of cheese in a mousetrap will be the mouse’s death for so little gain of such short duration, so the morsel on offer is only on offer to bait a victim to destruction.

23.9. We have met this theme and will meet it again. It would be casting pearls before swine (Matthew 7.6) to speak the gospel to a drunkard while he is drunk. But leave a tract with him, or speak when he is afterwards sober, and the result might be different. The wise evangelist will look to the Lord for sensible and opportune moments.

23.10-11. This is a return to 22.28 but with a different lesson. It teaches us that the same illustration or text may serve to illustrate different truths. As when Jesus, in similar teaching but on quite different occasions, spoke of the poor (Luke 6.20) and the poor in spirit (Matthew 5.3). Not only should the distinctions of ownership not be blurred, but trespassing on another’s property with damage in mind, especially when, as being fatherless, they cannot defend their rights, is expressly forbidden. God is their kinsman, the One with the right to redeem. His promise is to defend them and it is folly to mess with Him. The Saviour is the kinsman Redeemer of His children by His blood and it is written, “For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the LORD; I will set him in safety...” (Psalm 12.5).

The Lord pleads the cause of the afflicted (22.23). He pleads the cause of the fatherless. Therefore we should never defraud the defenceless in any way; we should not do it at all, or anything similar, but we particularly bring down the wrath of God if we attack those whom He defends. He pleads our cause, too, and invites us to plead our cause with Him. “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1.18).

23.12. This is a familiar theme but because of our natural lack of purpose and concentration, particularly in the spiritual life, it needs often to be repeated by the Holy Spirit. Here the emphasis is on application; as it was said to Timothy as a young minister seeking to benefit others and helping them in the Christian faith, so it needs to be said to us in our spheres, “study to show thyself approved unto God” (2 Timothy

2.15) where the word translated “study” means “hasten,” or “give application to”, and is translated in 2 Timothy 4.9 as “do thy diligence.” The natural heart is prone to light things and immaterial matters. We are to take our growth, and that of others, in the faith seriously.

23.13-14. A child needs to know parameters of behaviour and the sooner they are learned, by and large, the sooner they are accepted. It is no kindness to allow behavioural matters to drift. A brief punishment, soon over, is best for the child and has lasting good effects. It is not a popular doctrine today and, as in many other things which remain acceptable, the misuse and abuse by some has brought an attempted blanket ban on corporal punishment. Wild undisciplined children will father wild, undisciplined adults who, when their turn comes to mould society, will bring about the “perilous times” spoken of in 2 Timothy 3.1 when Biblical truths will all be scorned. More importantly, a conformity to the requirements of family and a learning within the family circle that these are the ways to happy society are foundational in giving the understanding that the same will be true of the family of God.

23.15-16. A child who grows up being biddable, affectionate and obedient is a delight to parents and will be drawn closer in their affections. They will share more of the family issues with them and their progress will be a joy. Nowhere is this more true than that they should become believers and that they should no longer need to be taught to know the Lord, for they walk with Him themselves (Jeremiah 31.34). “Reins” means “kidneys” (as in the renal department of a hospital). We are all familiar with the constant need to go to the toilet when we are approaching something which is affecting us emotionally, such as an examination, an injection, a visit to the dentist. While that may not be quite so apparent when the news is good, the expression is put for anything that moves our emotions. Parents and delighted Christian friends will be affectionately moved to observe the progress of youthful understanding. Concerning the twelve year old Lord Jesus Christ, it is written, “all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers” and “his mother kept all these sayings in her heart” (Luke 2.47,51).

23.17-18. The link is “heart” between this and the previous couplet. “Thine heart,” “my heart”, and now again “thine heart.” The classic passages concerning envy are the Psalms 37 and 73. “Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like grass, and wither as the green herb” (Psalm 37.1-2). The verses which follow present a highly desirable positive response to replace such envy. Psalm 73 gives us a picture of the battle in the heart of one who finds it his/her besetting sin to be envious. “I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalm 73.3). It is a struggle to overcome and brings with it (as does all sinful reaction) a sense of shame. “If I say, I will speak thus (as in the previous verses); behold, I should offend against the

generation of thy children. When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me” (Psalm 73.15-16). The whole matter comes to a climax with the same conclusion as in Psalm 37 but attained with much more difficulty. The Psalms 37 and 73 describe the end of the wicked; our proverb that of the overcoming believer, “for surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off.” “But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth” (James 3.14). All our actions, not only against envy, are to be in the fear of God continually – “all the day long.”

23.19-21. From verse 15 we have the former style of pleading once again. “My son” and then the pleas of father and mother. The second of these pleas begins here. Wisdom to resist the temptation of alcohol and feasting. “Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh” (20). As James writes, though in another connection, “This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish” (James 3.15). “For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banqueting and abominable idolatries: wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you” (1 Peter 4.3-4). “Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying” (Romans 13.13).

23.22-23. The most precious possession is truth; and the most precious truth is the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. Absolute values are not currently popular; and each of us is inclined to try to wriggle out of uncomfortable truths about ourselves. Invest in it; let truth be our most precious commodity. We are not to give up the truth for any expediency or convenience; to get us out of trouble, to curry favour or for any other reason. Wisdom, instruction and understanding are all ways of coming to the truth or, in the case of wisdom, practising the truth. To abandon these founding principles of life taught by a wise father and mother is to despise what they stand for. However much we may say that we love and respect our parents if we do not accept the truth of their teachings, most especially those rooted in the scriptures which make us wise unto the salvation which is in Christ Jesus, then we do despise and dishonour them in effect.

23.24-25. Nothing gives more lasting pleasure to a parent than to see a child converted and going on with the Lord Jesus Christ. “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John 4) wrote the apostle John about those who had believed through his preaching and instruction and for whom he was a father in the faith.

23.26. This verse was a favourite text of the preachers of an earlier generation. Not Solomon but Christ is seen to be the speaker and a direct appeal is made in this verse for the affectionate allegiance to the person and gospel of the Saviour for life and eternity.

23.27. The rightful affections of the heart of a child should be towards their parents. When the independence of youth rightly approaches, that affection should be sustained and the parents' values espoused more strongly than ever, if they are right values. That affection should not be transferred to tempting lusts. A believer must not give way to temptation but hold his/her affection to the Saviour fast to the end. The dual temptations of harlotry and alcohol are repeated in these ensuing verses. The pleading of Christ is constant that we are to maintain our vessels pure. It is wonderful picture language of our bodies being maintained like a container kept spotless to carry pure and life-giving liquid. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 4.4, "every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour."

What a loathsome reputation it is for a whore that her lifestyle and allurements be described as a "ditch." They are also described as a pit so narrow and so steep that there is no room to manoeuvre a way out to extricate oneself.

23.28 Her judgment before the Lord is great, for she has deliberately trapped the unwary and introduced such to her wiles. She is to a degree responsible for their downfall. Only the Lord knows how to apportion sentence when two share sin.

23.29-30. There is a remorseless mocking here – but totally with the aim, by ridicule, of making the sinner turn from the ruin of strong drink, and one who is not yet addicted from careering headlong down that path. For some the first drink may be too late. Six consequences of overmuch drinking are set before the would-be addict for consideration. It is a way of misery, sadness, arguments, tears, unnecessary blows from fighting and inflammation of the eyes. The throng of those with bottle or can in hand at all times is where these debasing characteristics can be constantly seen. Who in their right mind would want to join them? It comes not of deliberate intent mostly, but drink by drink by drink. It may afflict those who dally with the bottle at home as well.

23.31-35. There is an attraction in the colour, be it red or amber "nectar," when the desire is awakened. The colour and the foaming all prepare the weakened palate. The time to look away is instantly, for its bite leads to hallucinations and uncontrollable experiences, none of them pleasant. It is as reckless and stupid as lying on an inflatable in the swell of the sea or, (thinking of sailing ships), rolling with the tide exposed to high wind where the motions and buffetings may most be felt – atop the mast.

There is a sort of anaesthetic. Though there would not have been seasickness or buffeting but for the unnecessary and reckless flouting of danger, yet there has been a real beating and a battering and a sickness of their own volition. No sooner is the experience recovered from than it must be embarked upon once again. Such a person is incorrigible and this is where the attraction of strong drink may ultimately lead.

Proverbs 24

24.1-2. Seeing that the theme of envy is repeated, it would be good to read again Psalm 73 which is the best commentary on the subject, and to pray that we should be delivered from any lingering trace of this insidious evil.

Psalm 17 13-14 also provides an excellent observation and prayer. “Deliver my soul from the wicked which is thy sword: (Perhaps the reading in the margin is meant - “by thy sword” that is, the word of God; perhaps if believers are disobedient the wicked are allowed to hurt us, as the enemy nations attacked the nation of Israel.) from men which are thy hand, O LORD, from men of the world, which have their portion in this life.”

24.3-4. We may think of our individual families; we may think of a business “house;” we may think of a royal line (for example, the House of Windsor) – they are only established and maintained in the truest sense by the wisdom which Christ affords. A family that wastes its money on the non-necessities of life such as wasteful habits and luxuries will not be established. The prodigal son, though restored personally, lost his inheritance. However, when established, then the men of this world can garnish their homes. Believers will want to support the various spiritual interests of the kingdom, for they are looking, by Christ’s wisdom, for treasure in heaven.

24.5-6. The conclusion of this couplet is well-known:- “in multitude of counsellors there is safety.” The wisdom which is in Christ will lead committee members, deacons’ and elders’ meetings, church meetings to sure decisions. Unilateral decisions can sometimes be brilliant, and, equally, be led of the Lord. But for a congregation of the Lord’s people or a Christian society, for example, there is safety; not in numbers, merely, but in the many-sided contributed advice which may then be considered and weighed as unto the Lord. Perhaps the Saviour refers to verse 6 in Luke 14 31-32, “what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?”

24.7. The fool who has said in his heart that there is no God (Psalms 14,53) may be acceptable among the debased counsels of the worldly but the wisdom that is from above (James 3.17) will always be beyond him until he repents of his great folly. James 3. 13-18 would make good and relevant reading at this point.

24.8. “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child” (22.15). Mischief is perhaps here thought of as the seedling of evil. We tend to use the expression “getting into mischief” to indicate relatively lightweight sins; but, of course, there is really no such thing, for all sin is of a piece and one sin will lead to another.

24.9. The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery. But I say unto you that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5.27-28). Now, for example, thinking murderous thoughts is not the same as actually committing murder. But thoughts may lead on to deeds. But the Lord who knows our hearts regards the thoughts as much as the deeds. He pondereth the heart (21.2;24.12). We are convicted sinners by thinking things which we never do.

24.10. Another famous proverb. It is somewhat reproachful, encouraging believers not to give up at the first sign of difficulty, or even when the way gets harder than we previously experienced. This is the time to lean heavily upon the Lord. At the end of life, when its battles are nearly done and we haven’t given in, the description in the Song of Solomon 8.5 will apply to us, “Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?” The Lord speaks to Jeremiah in a somewhat similar vein, “If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” (Jeremiah 12.5). “Gird up the loins of thy mind” (1 Peter 1.13). Think straight, with the Lord’s help; do not falter but let our thoughts of God’s omnipotence nerve our powers to new heights in His service.

24.11-12. We are inclined by nature to say (or think) “I didn’t realise” when we actually did realise or when not to have realised is most culpable. Or perhaps we say, “nobody told me” when actually we had heard indirectly and it was a convenient excuse. The principle, “if thou sayest, Behold we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? And he that keepeth thy soul, doth he not know it? And shall he not render to every man according to his works?” is attached here to the particular example of verse 11 but there are all sorts of situations where the principle applies. The Saviour is aware of our pretence to innocence and we should strive to avoid any semblance of excuses.

24.13-14. Do you have a sweet tooth? This is picture language for the delightfulness of the scriptures and the spiritual wisdom they impart. If we have a taste for sweet things it is the sweetest of all sweet things to love the scriptures and the Saviour to whom they point. “O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him” (Psalm 34.8). These words were straight from the pen of David, Solomon’s father, concerning his deliverance from one of his most fraught experiences. It is possible that he spoke of this often to his son, thereby giving him an affectionate regard for the metaphor of tasting. Too many sugary things may not be good for us. Solomon will later instruct us (25.27), “it is not good to eat much honey.” But we can never have too much of the scriptures or enjoy too much of the lovingkindness and presence of the Saviour.

24.15-16. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. And, whether a wicked man reads this couplet or not, the fact of the matter is true. Rather this proverb is for the encouragement of the righteous; not the self-righteous but those whose righteousness is through the blood of the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand" (Psalm 37. 23-24). "The LORD upholdeth all that fall" (Psalm 145.14). That being the case, the wicked should look well to his own falling from which, without repentance, he will not rise again.

"Spoil not his resting place." Christ is our rest (Matthew 11.28-29)." There remaineth a rest to the people of God" (Hebrews 4.9). Christ cannot be destroyed nor can heaven. But peace in our hearts may be destroyed, as can faith at times. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" (Matthew 18.6-7).

24.17-18. This is a common reaction in the believer's old nature. When someone who has hurt us is hurt we may smirk to ourselves and be pleased. "Love your enemies," said the Saviour, "bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5.44-45).

24.19-20. Once again we are drawn to think about envy and that though evil men acquire things which we would like their future is not to be compared with that of a believer, and therefore a believer may gladly forgo what he thinks he would enjoy. "Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him: for they shall eat the fruit of their doings. Woe unto the wicked! It shall be ill with him: for the reward of his hands shall be given him" (Isaiah 3.10-11).

24.21-22. Solomon's father, David, who was a great king and entitled to deal with state affairs exclaimed, "LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me" (Psalm 131.1). The only thing too high for King David would be the providences of God. Not only should a believer not meddle in matters beyond him; neither should he be a lover of change for change's sake. This is particularly a temptation to a young believer newly enrolled in a church fellowship or a young minister but newly come to an established pastorate. In the case of the young minister it may mean that many will leave and that he will also be forced to resign thereby leaving behind him a severely weakened church fellowship. "Who knoweth the ruin of them both?" church and minister alike.

24.23. Seeing that the Proverbs is about wisdom, this verse seems to be drawing special attention to the immediately preceding and following verses. “These things also belong to the wise.” My own opinion is that this is referring particularly to verses 21-26 where royal matters (21), national interests (24), and public counsels (26) seem to be at issue. However, the next chapter begins a new section with the word “also.” It may therefore be that at this verse Solomon is tying some ends together and beginning his conclusion. The “also” would then run to verse 34.

The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7.24) where not persons but issues are in view. James 2.1 says, “My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.” We must respect people, of course; it is favouritism that is in mind, especially in response to a bribe or the personal advantage gained from favouring the powerful or wealthy. “There is no respect of persons with God” (Romans 2.11). The men sent to entangle Jesus spoke truly enough, though their aim was probably flattery, when they said, “Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men” (Matthew 22.16). They did not mean that He didn’t care for people or take any notice of them. Simply that He was never deflected from the truth to please anybody. The judiciary should always be separate from political interests if justice is not to be warped.

24.24-25. People often complain about political correctness. There is a silent majority opposed to many laws which a minority sometimes seeks to impose. It is this that is in view. The one who makes black white will be cursed and abhorred. Those who publicly oppose such wrong will be blest of God. Again, maybe Solomon was acutely aware of the last words of David (2 Samuel 23.1). “The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain” (2 Samuel 23.3-4).

24.26. We may smack our lips but it might be difficult to kiss them! We understand the expression. What is meant is not so much self-congratulation as the sense of wellbeing that comes from a job well done. As the Lord gives the wisdom to formulate our words, so He gives the sense of approval. “Because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge” (Ecclesiastes 12.9).

24.27. “The profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field” (Ecclesiastes 5.9). We are all dependent upon the “field”, that is, natural resources. In a modern consumer society, with many synthetics, we are apt to forget that we are sustained by the Lord’s continuing renewal of the earth. Most notably the input of the sun, and the provision of weather systems. We are taught priorities by these things.

First of all to render thanks unto God. Secondly, that work comes before play, or pleasure; and even before shelter. We must distinguish between the necessities of life and its extras. But in all things “seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6.33). “If God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith. Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? Or What shall we drink? Or Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness: and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matthew 6.30-34).

24.28. There is much unnecessary, unprovoked evil in the world. Let us not increase it. The Lord Jesus Christ said, “whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” (Matthew 5.22). “This cometh to pass (persecution for the sake of the gospel), that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law They hated me without a cause” (John 15.25 quoting Psalm 35.7,19) In two chapters time (26.2) we shall have “the curse causeless shall not come.” Justice and truth are the pillars of society; and as the church is the pillar and ground of the truth we should not heed even secondhand talk which might provoke opinions about someone unfairly and colour our thinking with nothing more than what is an unsubstantiated rumour.

24.29. Retaliation is not the mark of a believer. Human nature itches to hit back; and the one who retaliates is usually the one that gets caught. The finest exposition of these words which are, on the Lord’s authority, incumbent upon a Christian are to be found in Matthew 5.38-48 and should be read prayerfully at this juncture.

24.30-34. These five verses are a meditation upon idleness. Verse 32 gives us an insight into how Solomon received wisdom and how we, in our turn, may receive wisdom from the Holy Spirit. It is by considering well, by reflection, by meditation upon natural phenomena, things of everyday life and, most importantly, the Holy Scriptures. “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground...” (Genesis 3.17-19). The Lord permits no escape. Our labour may not be in the field, but it is just as demanding, just as perpetually wearying. If we do not work, being idle, we should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3.10). Other circumstances beyond our control, such as sickness and unemployment, may intervene. A traveller gets a move on before nightfall and so does poverty come upon a lazy person. There is an inevitability (or there certainly was in olden times and, of course, there still is in some places today) of a soldier or a brigand appearing on the scene with outrageous demands; so inevitably will a tattered life hasten towards the lazy one.

Proverbs 25

A new section of the Book of Proverbs begins here. We are told that the men of Hezekiah copied out these proverbs. It suggests that the proverbs which appear in chapters 25-29 are a selection, though it does not necessarily follow. In any case these men were guided by the Holy Spirit to include others of the 3000 Proverbs (1 Kings 4.32) which Solomon spoke and which were not already gathered in the earlier chapters. His speaking of them (rather than writing) mentioned in 1 Kings 4.32 suggests that they were assiduously taken down in his own time by the court recorders. Even so, this does not exhaust them all, for we still do not have 3000 of his proverbs.

Concerning the men of Hezekiah it would be good to read the life and times of Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29-32. It would also be useful to read Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Kings 16.19-20.21. You would then have the whole Bible record. You would be able to compare the style of record in 2 Kings with 2 Chronicles. And also see how the record of Isaiah was copied by the men of Hezekiah, perhaps, into the court records; or was it the court records which the disciples of Isaiah used to incorporate among Isaiah's prophecies? At least, you would observe how collections were made and see how the Holy Spirit selected some (but only some) to be included in the inspired and infallible Holy Scriptures. Maybe, again only maybe, the men listed in 2 Chronicles 31.12-13 were the very men who supervised these things. What was true of Hezekiah was doubtless true of these men under his leadership, "In every work that he began in the service of the house of God, and in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart and prospered" (2 Chronicles 31.21). May we have the same attitude and approach to all our work and especially to that worship and service which we offer in the house of God.

It is my impression, which there is no need for you to share, that chapters 25-29 are of a somewhat more exalted and elevated standard, which suggests to me that for this collection in chapters 25-29 the best (as it seemed to them, and certainly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) of the remaining proverbs of Solomon of which they were the custodians was gathered together. Maybe they had charge of the totality of Solomon's proverbs, maybe not – we have no means of knowing. Their inclusion in the divine record ensured their survival, for the others were destroyed; perhaps in the destruction of Jerusalem.

It seems to me (though I stress that this is only my personal impression) that for the most part these are, if not new themes, new ways of putting pithy sayings, which we have not already come across. Some themes, however, are repeated, perhaps more elegantly even than before. A number are quoted or alluded to in the New Testament, as we shall see.

In the days before printing, the copyists' work was highly prized. The scribes of New Testament times probably fulfilled much the same role. It was not only copying but their role as custodians of the sacred text (and of other writings) through their familiarity with the contents which entitled them to honour. This familiarity, this experience, this understanding of the meaning which enabled them not to be persuaded to change the text, was all very important in the transmission of all documents before printing. Just as we do not expect to find many printers' errors, so they ensured accuracy in all that they superintended.

25.2. The famous hymn says of God that He is, "in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." And also, "'Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee." He chooses to hide His person from sight; it is also the prerogative of God to forgive sins. "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins." (Isaiah 43.25; 44.22). However, God knows them all. He does not need to search them out. So that we see here, at one and the same time, what the honour of a king's rank is; but how far short of the glory of God he comes. He needs to search out what is "natural" enough to God. In the ability of kings, and those in authority, to get to the bottom of all matters of justice and to judge truthfully and accurately; and their ability to understand important matters lies their honour. Not simply in the trappings of monarchy or high office. There are wonderful things to be searched out not only by kings but by us all, especially believers. "The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein" (Psalm 111.2). The more we appreciate nature, providence and salvation the more we should seek to read up about them, to study and enquire after them to increase our understanding.

25.3. It is possible that Ephesians 3.17-19 is an allusion to this verse or, if unconsciously so, was there in Paul's well stored mind to be worked upon by the Holy Spirit, "that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge..." The love which is in the heart of King Jesus is higher than the heaven for height and the earth for depth and is unsearchable.

25.4. When we come to study Proverbs 27.21 we shall see that some of the elements mentioned here are repeated, but with a different application. The removal of dross is the first element of the perfecting of our natures ready for glory. Dross is the impurity which clings to metal, the base metal, when it comes out of the earth. Whatever it takes to remove it, it must be removed before the precious metal is worthy of use or ornament. As much as is base that remains, so much is that which is precious diminished, debased. The hearts of believers are being purified – indeed, we purify ourselves, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see

him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 John 3.2-3). The removal of dross in the life of a believer and the shaping of character are proceeding simultaneously in a way that is impossible with the metal from which this illustration is taken.

25.5. This verse draws a parallel with, indeed a conclusion from, the previous verse. The wicked courtier, advisor or privy counsellor is dross and the shaping of a kingdom in righteousness proceeds only when such dross is removed. In this particular a monarchy might be seen to be superior to a democracy, inasmuch as a single authoritarian ruler could act to depose such people whereas it is much more difficult for the leadership in a democracy to act, except in the most blatant of cases.

25.6-7. You will immediately recall Jesus’ words in Luke 14.1-11. His hearers, being chief Pharisees (Luke 14.1), would have known to what passage He was referring, especially in verse 10, “when thou art bidden go and sit down in the lowest room (place); that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship (honour) in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.” “In the place of” does not mean to take the place of, to replace, as it might do in modern English; but it means to join with them, to stand where they stand, and attempt to be involved with them in the affairs of state.

25.8. Getting involved in incidents or issues when they don’t concern us, is quite a temptation for some. It is also a temptation to put a point across without thought, only to find that the half had not been told us and we have to back down or brazen it out, neither of which is becoming. Still less is this appropriate in our dealings with a neighbour with whom we should dwell peaceably. “seeing he dwelleth securely by thee” (3.29).

25.9-10. Again it is a temptation to many to talk about neighbours behind their backs, and, if there is a grievance, it is a temptation to tell everyone else but him. In an echo of this proverb, the Lord Jesus Christ said, “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother” (Matthew 18.15). It is never an appropriate thing to share with others, particularly in a loose, lighthearted way, secrets that should be kept closely within a family. Husbands and wives should most certainly not share the secrets of a marriage with others, but the proverb goes way beyond that. We demean others if we betray personal failings, idiosyncrasies, known to us or shared with us as a mark of their trust in us. The one who hears us may do the same to us; or repeat the confidence back to the original person who will then know that only one person could have had that information to share and we will be shamed ourselves. Others knowing that we have publicized such things will not share their secrets with us.

25.11. Think of a solid silver goblet, tray or ornament with engravings pictured in pure gold. The silver and gold direct our thoughts to the value of the item, while the pictures direct us to its beauty. As the gold carving outweighs in value and greatly enhances the silverware; so appropriate and wise advice, whether cautionary or inspirational, turns the situation which is being addressed to a successful, peaceable and productive outcome, greatly appreciated and perhaps of more worth than can be expressed.

25.12. If we ask ourselves whether the golden earring which draws attention to the ear is of more value than the wonderful mechanisms of the ear itself we will readily understand that the loss of hearing would be greater than the loss of an earring. It is greater than money can buy. A wise reprover, faithful and just to show us our faults and make us see where they will ultimately lead, and to do so in a way which will be acted upon is a wonderful asset; but greater still is the life of the one who heeds the advice and is thereby preserved. It is all for his welfare.

25.13. Now “snow in summer...is not seemly” (26.1). It will both damage the crops and delay the harvesting, so this cannot be the meaning. I quote the explanation of Gill. “As snow, that in those hot countries used to be kept in vessels, in places underground, to cool their drink with in summertime; just as ice is kept with us in like places, for the same purpose; and then the sense is, as drink cooled with snow is very agreeable, and exceeding refreshing to those that labour in the field in the time of harvest, so is a faithful messenger...” His masters are relieved that the aim of their message was achieved. We are to be faithful messengers of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Read again Genesis 24 for a fine example of a faithful messenger. And, though it is not about a messenger, unless a king be thought of as God’s messenger, it would be a good time now to refresh ourselves with 2 Samuel 23.4. It concerns “refreshing;” the refreshing that a ruler brings to his people by justice.

25.14. The clue to the interpretation of this verse lies in 2 Peter 2.17 and Jude 12. Each, with slightly different wording, speaks of clouds without water. In each case it is false teachers who are being described by such words. It would be good to read the whole of 2 Peter 2 and Jude. False teachers claim teaching gifts, but they claim falsely. “They speak great swelling words of vanity” (2 Peter 2.18). “These speak evil of those things which they know not” (Jude 10). The verse can be interpreted in a much wider sense, as of one bragging about his giving when his contributions are minimal. But by interpreting scripture by scripture, and comparing scripture with scripture, we see that the issue of false teachers and how to discern them is the most significant application of this proverb.

25.15. Perhaps Solomon had had such an experience; or learned it from his father in the matter of the numbering of the people (2 Samuel 24.2-4,10) and Abigail (1 Samuel 25.24-35).

25.16. Success goes to the head very rapidly. Praise turns our heads likewise. How to handle praise in particular is outlined in 27.21 but this proverb is more general. Enough is enough. A miser may hoard where it would be his wisdom to spend upon his welfare. A small business is successful, but over expansion changes its character and at length causes it to implode.

25.17. It is not good to live in one another's pocket, as we say. If we become tiresome, people will dread our approach and hate us and everything about us, including the Saviour we represent.

25.18. The 9th commandment reads, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Exodus 20.16) so that first and foremost this is a sin against God. This proverb is designed to help us to understand the iniquity of our sin by making us see that if men, our neighbours especially, see us in such a light how terrible must we appear in the sight of God. The hammer blows of a false witness crush the spirit; his thrusts pierce and pain the heart; he is a poisoned arrow. Unreasonably, the common perception is that where there is smoke there is fire. And if a person's reputation is ruined by what the perpetrator knows to be lies, even if justice be pronounced it will take a lot of living down and the heartache will be a terrible burden.

25.19. A broken tooth and a foot out of joint, twisted or even broken, were in ancient days without remedy. Hill walking would become a most painful exercise; eating cold food excruciating while hard food would be impossible. And if necessity decreed that mountainous terrain must be travelled rapidly or only that which is cold or hard eaten in order to escape danger then, without speed, capture or death might ensue. To rely on an untrustworthy person at any time is irksome, but in time of emergency is disaster. We should not trust such nor be such ourselves. Let us be faithful and unwavering in our trustworthiness to the Saviour Who is Himself utterly to be relied upon.

25.20. There is a time and place for even the most justifiable of actions. Supposing even that a man's garment was forfeit for a pledge or a debt, a less damaging opportunity could surely have been found if there was kindness and sensitivity. It is perhaps sensitivity which is illustrated by vinegar upon nitre, where there will be a chemical reaction perhaps of hissing or spitting, perhaps of smell. They do not mix. So there is an incongruity in the singing of a person who is contented and at ease in the presence of one who is sad and grieving. At the very least it is a thoughtless and inconsiderate action; at worst, deliberately designed to inflict physical harm and mental torture.

25.21-22. The Lord Jesus Christ says that we are to love our enemies; that is to say, we are not to make enemies. There are those who will make enemies of us and we are to deal with them kindly. Paul quotes this proverb in Romans 12.20-21 to show Christians

how we are not to retaliate but to return kindness to those who harm us. “If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.” To which Paul adds, “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” As the good Samaritan said to the innkeeper, “when I come again, I will repay thee” (Luke 10.35), so will the Lord Jesus Christ at His return.

25.23. The north wind causes differing climatic conditions in different places. Who would have welcomed being on the receiving end of Christ’s anger, as in Mark 3.5 and Luke 11. 37-54? Even the frown of a just person, or a withering look, will cause the fountain of malicious slander to be dried up, often instantly.

25.24. We have met this theme before and will meet it again. Sadly, It is a common enough observable experience to be used as picture language. What a believer needs in this wide and brawling world with all its rich accommodation, is time to be alone with the Lord, space to read the scriptures to encourage ourselves in Him, before returning to the world’s complex and often anti-Christian values with equanimity.

25.25. We have recently considered cold waters in verse 13. What more reviving in this dry and thirsty land than the words and friendship of the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ! “O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is...Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee” (Psalm 63.1,3). The Saviour is from heaven and brings His reviving words, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7.37-38).

25.26. The apostle James in his letter (3.11) mentions a corrupt spring. It cannot at the same place send forth sweet water and bitter. If there is mixture, it is corrupt. Where the good serves the bad, corruption holds sway in any walk of life. A believer should make a stand and not fall down before the wicked, for example in the observance of the Lord’s Day.

25.27. Too much sweetness is sickly. It is a sickening sight to behold people only looking to show off and parade their abilities. The art of art is in concealing art. Humility befits Christian men, women and children, remembering our Master “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 12.2).

25.28. If it is a believer’s shortcoming, he/she should make a great point of overcoming emotional outbursts, bad tempers, sour comments and the like with the help of this proverb. As a person might train in a gym, so we must train our spirits to be ruled and mastered, controlled and directed by the Holy Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are otherwise defenceless against the wiles of men and devils.

Proverbs 26

The first twelve verses of this chapter, with the possible exception of verse 2 where “fool” is not mentioned, contain a grouping of proverbs concerning fools. The wisdom of Christ turns us from natural foolishness, especially that carelessness concerning the welfare of our immortal souls which so characterises men and women. “Thou fool,” said the Lord Jesus Christ of the man who neglected his soul’s interests. Read Luke 12.16-21. The apostle Paul writes (1 Corinthians 1.18), “the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.”

26.1. Snow and rain are wonderful provisions of the Lord but neither is appropriate to summer or harvest. Rain in harvest may not only hinder ingathering but damage the crops. Doubtless many readers down the years have smiled wryly to themselves recalling days when they have delayed harvesting because of rain, or worked through heavy showers while ingathering or lost valuable crops through downpours and have appreciated the parallel. Honour is not appropriate for a fool whose elevated position may hinder real progress, undo negotiations, spoil diplomacy and discredit his employers.

The Lord Jesus Christ said, “I receive not honour from men...How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?” “He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true and no unrighteousness is in him” (John 5.41,44;7.18). “Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not” (Jeremiah 45.5).

26.2. The Lord Jesus Christ, alluding to Psalm 35.19, said, “They hated me without a cause” (John 15.25). Birds fly purposefully when hunting or migrating but if they are simply enjoying thermals they stay in the same location. People may curse someone and declare, “may they rot in hell,” but the words uttered have no power to accomplish that end whether there is cause for such an imprecation or not, except that it may fasten upon a weak mind or guilty conscience. But if there is no reason for it the malice then fails of its purpose by the superintending power of a just God. Believers are not to curse, but rather “bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that spitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5.44). Though this proverb is the only one in this section not to mention “fool” explicitly, it is as foolish to act unreasonably as to have no purpose, no direction.

26.3. If a working horse will not pull, nor the ass be directed, then the use of the whip or bridle is sanctioned. So a fool, if he is to be brought to his senses, needs correction and may only understand the language of chastisement.

26.4-5. What may sometimes appear to be identical situations may need, under the wisdom of the Lord, to be handled differently. On one occasion contradicting a fool may embroil a believer in unseemly argument. However, if a foolish statement is left

unchallenged he may persist in his pernicious statements, perhaps, to undermine the faith of some. At all times we need to answer carefully, in dependence upon the Lord.

26.6. There is an elegant contrast here between hands and feet. Modern English speaks similarly of “shooting oneself in the foot.” The message would have got there sooner if we had taken it ourselves. A useful hour could be whiled away looking up the word “feet” in a concordance and refreshing ourselves spiritually by looking up the references. Drinking is by nature more rapid than eating. The repercussions of sending a foolish man with an urgent message will soon appear. The messengers of the cross are neither to be foolish in their preaching or their methods nor tardy in their reaching the lost.

26.7. A parable told by a fool will fail to make its application and be totally irrelevant to the point in hand which is supposedly being illustrated.

26.8. A stone in a sling is to be fired and must be loose prior to being aimed. The carrying of stones to be used in a sling are not bound in the sling itself but carried in a pouch. It is counterproductive, not fit for purpose, to place a fool in a position of authority where direction and precision are needed.

26.9. The drunkard becomes insensitive and may not feel the thorn, nor its festering, until afterwards. A parable, which ideally makes a point explicit, is lost in the mouth of a fool. If it doesn't actually cause hurt and damage the cause for which it is uttered, it will prove unfeeling. 26.7 spoke of its irrelevance while this proverb speaks of its insensitivity.

26.10. The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans also? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5.44-48).

The words of the Lord Jesus bid believers show the characteristic of their heavenly Father by not discriminating in their good behaviour towards all sorts and conditions of men. In this proverb the point is that the Lord knows how to distinguish and reward appropriately. This is also something believers should ask wisdom to be able to do in their dealings with people. “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished” (2 Peter 2.9).

26.11. This is quoted in 2 Peter 2.22. “It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it happened unto them according to the true proverb, “The dog is turned to his own vomit again” (2 Peter 2.21-22). Here is an example of the Holy Spirit giving the definitive interpretation in the New Testament of an Old Testament passage and at the same time setting the Lord’s approval on the contents of the book of Proverbs and, indeed, of the whole Old Testament. A dog will sniff again his own foulness; a criminal will sometimes return to the scene of his crime to gloat; no good will come of it but a fool is incorrigible and will repeat his errors.

26.12. Using the illustration of the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 18. 10-14 as an example one would suppose that there is more hope of the Pharisee being reclaimed than a fool.

26.13. Now we have three verses about the lazy man. There may or may not be a lion in the street (in the days when lions did indeed roam) but there is danger everywhere, even in staying at home. It is simply an excuse and should be recognised as such.

26.14. Do the hinges creak and groan? Then lazybones will find it a grievous thing to be disturbed and will turn over again. Are the hinges well oiled and turn smoothly? So will lazybones find it an agreeable thing to take one position on his bed and then another but not venture beyond it.

26.15. This proverb is virtually a repetition of 19.24 with the added mocking thought of the grief it causes him to move himself to action, even to the extent of the necessity of feeding himself. Clearly this is the way of self-destruction as he will soon be beyond help.

26.16. We have all met the idle person who brags about his homespun philosophy, though he knows nothing compared with the well thought out rationale behind the lifestyle of the industrious.

26.17. A passer-by runs the real risk of being bitten, scratched and savaged if he takes a dog by the ears. There is a real temptation to get involved in things which are not our concern, else this theme would not be so often repeated under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

26. 18-19. It is not good to joke about serious matters or to frighten people and then say, “I was only joking.” The fear or surprise may cause a heart attack or much unwarranted heart searchings. It is a combustible matter, a dangerous thing ,to stir up the cinders of fear in deep-seated issues. In ancient days a madman who was playing with fire and endangering lives had to be restrained by as many as it took before the matter got totally out of hand and destroyed a village.

26.20. Collecting wood was a frequent chore in woodburning communities so that the home fires could be kept burning. Strife is kept burning by retailing tales for gossip and believers should give a wide berth to anything that smacks of idle tales. The Holy Spirit has caused this to be written in the New Testament (1 Timothy 5.13):- "...not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not."

26.21. This proverb is concerned with the stoking of a fire already well alight. Where there is strife it is augmented and sustained by people of a particular disposition; those who love argument for argument's sake, or must always have the last word without which they cannot leave a matter alone.

26.22. When people relate personal affairs, whether true, false or containing some truth, but with a little embellishment, it embarrasses, hurts and undermines trust. It is in direct contradiction to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, a direct contradiction to the commandments of God, "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7.12).

26.23. A shard of a broken pot may be sharp. It is certainly valueless. No one would cover it with real silver, but in the interests of deceit a cheat might attempt to pass off an item glittering with silver paper (or its equivalent) as something of real worth. It might attract a child initially, but that is all. Insincere and damaging speech stoked by a furnace of evil thoughts within the heart is a cheap and malicious substitute for what thoughtful words and a kind heart could achieve instead.

26.24-25. To dissemble is to say one thing and mean another and by so doing pull the wool over someone's eyes, as we say. This is how the hatred which seeks only to damage and destroy lives expresses itself and the wise, but humble, believer should be aware of what lies behind it. It is poured forth out of a heart which is thoroughly evil and harbouring all manner of ruinous sins.

26.26. Just as Achan's sin of covetousness and disobedience to the Lord's commandment was revealed before the whole congregation, because of its damaging effect, before punishment was administered (Joshua 7), so concealed hatred will also be revealed. "There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known," said the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 10.26).

26.27. There is a real risk that a pit will collapse on top of the digger and kill him. It is hard work pushing a boulder uphill and if the one who pushes tires it may run over him. The inference is that the intent of the pit is to trap and of the boulder to be hurled at someone. The damage will be done to the perpetrator, if not first, then in summary justice by the Lord. For as Haman was hanged on his own gallows (Esther 7.10) so the Lord returns sin upon the heads of those who commit it, except they repent.

26.28. Lies and flattery are united in their baleful effect upon those who are the subjects of it. We should repudiate lies, but ignore their hurt, and not be seduced by flattery, with the help of the wisdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Proverbs 27

27.1. "It is appointed unto men once to die" (Hebrews 9.27). God has made an appointment for us with death. Of that much we are sure. We do not know when it is, precisely so that we may be utterly dependent on Him for daily guidance. This is the believer's strength. "Boasting" of tomorrow is not so much bragging about it as assuming that we have a tomorrow. "Go to now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (James 4 13-15).

The apostle Paul is careful about this. "I trust to tarry a while with you", he writes to the Corinthians, "if the Lord permit" (1 Corinthians 16.7). He does not know that he will necessarily be spared and have sufficient mental capacity to carry on writing his letter to the Hebrews, so he writes, "And this will we do, if God permit" (Hebrews 6.3). He does not know for sure that God might not appoint some other matter to intervene.

And he also writes concerning the most important matter of being saved that, seeing we do not know that we have a tomorrow, we should not delay to seek the Lord's pardon and salvation. "Exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin...Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Hebrews 3.13,15).

A day may bring forth an accident, a heart attack, a stroke, a tragedy. Events may be life threatening and life changing. The Lord thereby keeps us on a short lead, so to speak, that we do not wander out of control. We do not have to worry about our future. We are simply required to lay it constantly before Him whose precise direction in all things overrules everything together for the believer's good and for the furtherance of His kingdom.

27.2. When the Lord Jesus Christ said to the centurion (Matthew 8.10), "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel," that was unsought praise indeed. When He said to Nathanael (John 1.47), "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" that judgment was spot on and unlooked for. When others praise us they may be being generous but their appraisal may be flawed. What we desire is the Master's, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," and to hear Him say, "Come, ye blessed of my

Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25.21,23,34). That is the ultimate praise. That is the ultimate reward.

27.3-5. It may take two to heave a stone. Wet sand is particularly heavy, retarding the progress of the walker. A fool is likely to be needlessly angry, being unable to judge a matter rightly, and cause harrowing and continuing grief. And if anger is hurtful, especially if it is out of order, how much more devastating is the envy, the unprovoked hostile jealousy, of the envious. We cannot help the gifts which the Lord has given us and if we have worked hard to achieve the fulfilment of the Lord’s gracious provision it is galling to be the butt of unprovoked envy. On the other hand the one who harbours a secret passion which may issue, say, in stalking is likely to persist in being troublesome and it would have been better to have merited censure, over and done with in one face to face interview, than to endure unwanted and persistent adulation.

27.6. It is difficult to find a way of explaining to our friends the things they need to know before they suffer acute embarrassment or fall into deep trouble, but though it will be hurtful we owe it to them. They may not like it at first but this proverb encourages them to realise that it was in loyalty to them that such a course of action was taken out of love. It is no mark of love to be flattered concerning our weaknesses. This proverb calls to mind the betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ by Judas Iscariot, to whom He responded, “Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?” (Luke 22.48). That was treachery indeed!

27.7. If we have recently eaten our fill the very idea of eating more is too much to contemplate. But when a person through poverty is surviving on scraps he is likely to be so desperate as to eat that which is contaminated or poisonous. The spiritually hungry soul may turn to false teachings to satisfy inward cravings; and the rule of all learning, especially spiritual assimilation, is, “precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little” (Isaiah 28.10).

27.8. A bird on home territory is familiar with its surroundings. If it strays it may meet with unaccustomed and dangerous situations and meet fatal enemies of whose existence it was unaware. There is always danger in wandering off and running away from home. There is especial danger in throwing off the perceived shackles of being brought up in the faith. Some may not survive to replicate the experience of the prodigal son in coming to himself (Luke 15.17).

27.9. If we walk in the vicinity of orange blossom or lavender or any other sweet-scented herb it is a great delight to our senses. Good sensible advice and encouragement in pleasant conversation with a friend in the regular way of things brings great spiritual and practical pleasure with it. It is faithful counsel which does not need to wound because it is not directed to our faults but to the ongoing

discussion of how best to live our lives. It is a great joy when this is fulfilled within a marriage. It is supremely fulfilled in the spiritual fellowship of believers.

27.10. As children we are familiar with family friends, “uncles” and “aunties.” It is quite likely that in some cases we inherit the same affinity that our parents had towards them. Their interest in us while we were growing up radiated their love. We will later make our own friends, the friends of our mature years. We must keep up with our friends and show ourselves friendly (Proverbs 18.24) and above all cultivate our supreme relationship with the Saviour. It is good to be on excellent terms with our neighbours for, when things go wrong, our relatives may be far away and take some time to hear about our state and make arrangements to come, while our neighbours may offer instant help. These, perhaps non-Christian relationships, may in difficult circumstances be a means of Christ’s drawing them to Himself. People are often melted not by what we do for them but by what they can do for us when we are vulnerable.

27.11. The apostle John wrote (3 John 4), “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.” There may be those who criticise our children to our face but if we know that our children have made a good and sound choice we can dismiss such reproaches. Of Moses it is written, doubtless when the Egyptians criticised him for forsaking their culture for the people of God, that he esteemed “the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt” (Hebrews 11.26). When the cause is right the reproaches may be borne - for ourselves or for our children.

27.12. This proverb is identical to 22.3. When the men of Hezekiah copied out these proverbs (25.1) they must surely have been aware of the repetition; and under the influence of the Holy Spirit repeated it. Repetitions are for emphasis or because there is a double need to deal with a common situation or to meet and deal with a common error. It is a believer’s wisdom to avoid trouble where he can. There may be a time when it is right to heed the words of the Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples (Matthew 10.23), “When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another” while on another occasion it may be right to remain. “Wisdom is justified of her children” (Matthew 11.19) where the outcome vindicates the decision, especially when there had been conflicting advice or criticism. Do re-read the comments on 22.3.

27.13. You might as well give your garment or money away if you stand bail out of misguided affection or trust for someone you don’t really know or have an illicit desire towards. Their aim is to cheat.

27.14. Some like to rise up early and some to stay up late. But Christ would urge us by these wise words to be always most considerate for others. However good the reason (“blesseth”), however hearty the intention (“with a loud voice”), the “wakey, wakey,

rise and shine” approach is not welcome. Its very inconsiderateness nullifies every good intention. “Let not your good be evil spoken of” (Romans 14.16).

27.15. Cold, uncomfortable, miserable, soaking, unrelenting - none of us likes such a grey day nor likes to face such continual verbal abuse.

27.16. Her continual argumentativeness betrays her unwanted presence to all. The wind ruffles everything and penetrates clothing; there is no way in which it can be restrained let alone hidden. As soon as somebody with a strong scent enters the room unseen people are aware of his/her presence. So an argumentative person thrusts her presence upon all however unwilling or unwitting they are to be party to her rancour.

27.17. As a carborundum used to be used to sharpen a scythe or a sickle and was a familiar agricultural tool to a bygone generation so the mental stimulation, spiritual encouragement and irresistible persuasion of a friend enables even the highest achiever to press still further forward. Not only does it spur to greater achievement but it also gives the greatest pleasure.

27.18. God kindly establishes the principle for the Levites who had no portion that they were to eat certain portions of certain offerings presented by the worshippers (Leviticus 6.16,26; 7.6,31,32). Paul elaborates on this principle (1 Corinthians 9.11) “If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?” The author of the Proverbs writes in the Song of Solomon 8.12, (talking to himself, as it were) “Thou, O Solomon, must have a thousand, and those that keep the fruit thereof two hundred.” That is to say, one fifth is the proportion that the keeper should retain, while the rest should be paid to the owner. We owe the Saviour our very souls; but we are permitted to live unto Him as we please according to the direction of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. “Ye are not your own...ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6. 19-20). “Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold...but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1.18).

27.19. We see our own reflection in water and the stiller the water the truer the reflection. In the peaceful relationship of a true friend we see our own dearest values likewise esteemed and our hearts are knit together. The believer sees in Christ, as he reads of Him in the Gospels and throughout scripture, the fulfilment of all his truest aspirations for his own character and of his desires for true living and for eternity.

27.20. Until the Lord returns and “the earth...and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Peter 3.10) there will be no end to destruction. All the days of an unredeemed man’s life he will see “must have” things which he covets, and even a believer, being in Christ, may have to resist steadfastly the inner sense of dissatisfaction which was his inheritance in Adam.

27.21. The most valuable metal must be submitted to the furnace to remove all dross, and silver must have its pot in which to be refined. Praise must be submitted to the fire. It is but dross if it goes to a person's head and gives a sense of self-importance. But if it spurs him on to greater and more self-effacing achievements then it polishes his character and burnishes his work.

27.22. There are a number of terms here which have largely vanished from use. To bray is to crush or beat. A mortar is a hard container – hard enough not to be destroyed itself by pummelling. A pestle serves rather like a cook might use a whisk. It is a solid instrument to crush corn for making bread. The crushing of wheat releases its goodness and energy for human consumption. The battering or chastisement of a fool does nothing to change his foolish character.

27.23. The subject introduced at this verse continues to the end of the chapter. We keep a toddler on a short lead to keep him from danger. A wise elderly person living alone keeps the alarm within reach. It is wise to exercise detailed care in the things which belong to our livelihood. The Christian pastor should understand and care about the issues which the Lord's people face; health, jobs, the raising of their children, fears and decisions - as far as in him lies and just so far as the brethren are willing to confide.

27.24. Seeing that nothing lasts long, and even estates and nations which stretch from generation to generation will not last for ever, it is wisdom to work hard and make every effort to improve and enjoy them to the best of our ability. Churches that were once sound, and therefore flourishing, soon become a shadow of their former selves if they admit error, immorality or simply carelessness about the practice of their faith into their lives.

27.25 Our author writes in Ecclesiastes 3.1, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." There is a time to gather the herbs for garnishing and for remedies; for gathering hay to feed the cattle; for shearing the sheep and slaughtering the lambs for food; for raising and selling livestock. If these are diligently attended to there will be more than enough for the homeowner, his family and those who depend upon him. Of the virtuous woman it is written, "She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness" (Proverbs 31.27). Whatever needs to be done in the household of God, conducting worship and preaching, ordinarily or at weddings or funerals; whatever service may be offered in Sunday School or on the diaconate or eldership; whatever behind-the-scenes service may be needful, let us "look well" to our service in the Lord in all things.

Proverbs 28

28.1. In Leviticus 26.17 the Lord declared to the disobedient, “I will set my face against you...and ye shall flee when none pursueth you.” It is easy through fear to be afraid when there is nothing to be afraid of, but this is a set frame of mind imposed by the Lord on the disobedient and enforced through a guilty conscience. However, the Lord’s people may triumph in the face of all sorts of adversities by the moving of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. He moves in events, creating faith and strength by faith to achieve the victory, enabling believers to be proactive in meeting every situation.

28.2. A state may be unified under a sole powerful but just ruler and its welfare increased. We have had occasion to consider 2 Samuel 23.3-4. Many are the contenders for the throne or for leadership, vying one with another, when a land lies under the judgment of the Lord. This proverb may also refer to the advantages of a united kingdom which, under the Lord’s judgment, may disintegrate and be divided into political, sectarian or tribal factions.

28.3. You would expect people of like situation to support one another for their mutual advancement. When there is internal dissension in any organisation, or civil war in a nation, the seeds of disintegration are sown. When the poor, who have virtually nothing, fight over the little they have a desperate desolation will ensue. It is a well chosen picture. The sweeping rain flattens the crops and washes away the soil, leaving hunger in its wake until the next season or the arrival of external aid.

28.4. It is in the interests of the lawless to promote the destruction of law and order. They will promote and encourage every form of illegality, especially disobedience to the commandments of God, to attain their wicked, Satanic, agenda. Those who prize God’s ways and are law abiding citizens are taught by this proverb not to allow the right way to suffer by default but do all in their means to oppose the wrong.

28.5. Psalm 119.98-100 expresses it well. “Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they (thy commandments) are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts.” Those who turn from the Lord do not understand judgment; whether to uphold and deliver justice or to understand the things that are coming to pass from the Lord in their own day.

28.6. Whether we are thinking of uprightness in a natural man or the righteousness of God which is by faith in a born again believer, either is better than this world’s riches and gives more satisfaction to the inner man.

28.7. The joining of a gang mostly leads to the abandoning of those morals and standards inculcated at home and makes a parent ashamed of the chosen way of life adopted by a son.

28.8. The Lord will reverse all iniquity and this proverb reminds us that those who charge exorbitant interest, the “sharks” as we call them, will finally lose their ill-gotten gains and their wealth will be redistributed to the advantage of the destitute.

28.9. It is inappropriate for a man who despises the commandments of God, those fundamentals which are for the regulating of life, to expect anything from God by way of favour. Indeed, such a prayer may precipitate the Lord’s anger against him.

28.10. Satan designs the fall of mankind and shall enter into everlasting destruction (Revelation 20.10). His minions will follow suit (Revelation 20.15). The reversals of fortune of Haman, Esther and Mordecai (Esther 7.10-8.1) are an excellent illustration of this proverb.

28.11. The expression “wise in his own conceit” (that is, wise in his own eyes) has come down into our language. His wealth gives him privilege or protection and the rich man may find he is so cushioned from much adversity as to think his own wisdom has caused this attainment. A poor but wise man will probe and lay bare the weaknesses of his reasoning when he has cause to take issue with him.

28.12. When good men govern well everybody benefits and shares the advantages. But when the wicked rule, political correctness rules also and those who love commonsense may find themselves having to keep a low profile.

28.13. Very often the first reaction to the committing of evil is to run away from the scene or deny what has been done. A child is taught to make a clean breast of his fault and that to do so is always best no matter what the consequences. Confessing of sins is not ultimately enough where victory over temptation is to be attained, especially in the life of a believer who will be more acutely aware of such things by the Spirit than ever he was in his natural days. The forsaking of them is the test of how much we prize our sins, how they lurk within and it may be an acute struggle to abandon them. The mercy of the Lord appears most attractive to a convicted, guilty sinner.

28.14. The hardening of the heart, as with Pharaoh, leads to destruction. Such hardening is oftentimes a judicial hardening of the heart by the Lord Himself, “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (Romans 9.18). In the case of Pharaoh it was so from beginning to end, for before the commencement of the plagues the Lord said, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart” (Exodus 7.3); after the first it is written that the Lord hardened his heart (Exodus 7.13) and at the end likewise (Exodus 11.10) with examples in between. The fear spoken of is not a craven fear but reverential, filial fear; a combination of respect and awe.

28.15. The roaring lion walketh about seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5.8); the bear on the prowl makes people hide for safety. A wicked ruler terrifies the people

seeking to despoil them. He even enters into their homes to remove them and confiscate their property in order to destroy all opposition and obtain wealth for his wicked purposes.

28.16. Such a prince-oppressor was Ahab. Read 1 Kings 21. Covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3.5) and is therefore a transgression of the 2nd commandment. A ruler, or a pastor will serve the people of his kingdom, his pastorate best by seeking the wisdom which Christ freely bestows. Paul could truly say (with the tacit agreement of the Ephesian elders as he left them), "I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel" (Acts 20.33).

28.17. The Lord graciously provided cities of refuge (Numbers 35) so that the person who had accidentally killed another could flee and be safe from the avenger of that relative's blood. If the elders of the city of refuge found him to be guilty of deliberate murder rather than manslaughter then it was provided that they should turn him over to the avenger of blood. There was nowhere to flee for the murderer; his end would be the stoning pit and none, even of his nearest and dearest, should seek to withstand the sentence of death he so deserved. It is a terrible matter to have murdered and because nowadays nations have failed immediately to pass God's sentence for murder upon such he must spend the rest of his days fleeing to the pit from his conscience. "No murderer hath eternal life abiding in him," (1 John 3.15) but in his remaining days he may repent and begin abiding in eternal life.

28.18. The Lord will preserve the believer from the enemies of the gospel, even though it may mean death, which is but the entrance into life. Note the juxtaposition of these verses in Luke 21.16&18:- "Some of you shall they cause to be put to death...But there shall not an hair of your head perish." Luke 12.4 is also to the point, "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do." It is not so much the immediacy of destruction which is in mind as the unexpectedness, perhaps the suddenness, of it. The perverse man who says in his heart, "My Lord delayeth his coming" shall find that "the lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him" (Luke 12. 45-46). When Adam ceased to walk in obedience to God the change in him - his fear of God - was immediate, the sentence of death followed shortly and death itself inevitably some years later. It is perverse in a believer to hate his brother and "he that loveth not his brother abideth in death" (1 John 3. 14-15).

28.19. The expression "poverty enough" is evocative, for sufficiency is normally associated with blessings. Working at our daily living is the Lord's appointed way. Something has gone wrong in a nation when unemployment is so rife that a person cannot find work and it should be a matter of much prayer to right these wrongs. If the state cannot provide opportunities for work it must provide benefits and by so doing it encourages loungers and scroungers.

28.20. Just as we say that for a politician to be elected he must probably have lied; or for an evangelical to become a bishop he must probably have surrendered the heart of his evangelicalism so the man who gets rich quickly has probably cheated somewhere along the line.

28.21. Respect of persons, of course, means favouritism. Instead of dispensing justice it will lead someone to be susceptible to bribery and he will destroy his conscience for a pittance.

28.22. An evil eye means to look on somebody in such a way that the mere sight evokes hatred and stirs up such hard feelings that will admit of nothing but planning to harm him. It has connotations of casting a spell where the practice of magic is rife. The Lord Jesus Christ uses the expression on four occasions:- “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6.22-23). (On a different occasion the Lord taught similarly in Luke 11.34.) “I do thee no wrong...Is thine eye evil, because I am good?” (Matthew 20. 13-15). “Within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries...an evil eye, blasphemies... (Mark 7. 7.21-22). How great is the darkness of the one who desires only to be rich in this world’s goods which must perish with the using as well as with his own demise; and finally with the perishing of this world. (Colossians 2.22; Psalm 49. 17-18; 1 Peter 1.7).

28.23. The most significant use of “afterwards” is probably Hebrews 12.11. “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” There are situations which after we have spoken necessary words of correction (perhaps to an individual child or a class) cause us grief while we pray over and think about what the outcome will be; but, if the Lord is kind to both parties, afterwards there is a profitable outcome and it is agreed on both sides, perhaps tacitly, that it had to be done.

28.24. Mark 13.9-13 is a relevant example of this proverb. To declare a thing “Corban” was to set it aside for the Lord instead of devoting it to other use. If it was an amount destined for a parent, then the question is raised by the Lord whether it is proper for a bright idea of ours to override a stated commandment of the Lord (the 5th) concerning the care of parents. There are those who to fund a habit or a pleasure do rob their parents and the iniquity of such a thing is here declared. It will probably break the parents’ hearts and so destroy them. There is just a hint (by the use of the word “companion”) that he might have been put up to it, that it might have been suggested by a companion with no conscience.

28.25. The contrast is between stirring and trusting. Troublemaking originates in an unregenerate heart. A believer is enabled to be at peace as he trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ to work all things out for good. Psalm 73.7 speaks of the wicked that “their eyes stand out with fatness” but here to be made fat is used in a good sense.

28.26. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17.9) That being the case, the very deceitfulness of the heart will betray the fool into a wrong conclusion about himself. If a believer, instead of walking confidently in his own prowess, turns to the Lord Jesus Christ for help, he/she will be wisely guided.

28.27. There are always those who have hit hard times through no fault of their own and merit our kind generosity. But what about those who have brought their own misery upon themselves? There would be much less need of doctors, hospitals or ambulances and all sorts of repairers if we were not to help one another when we have got ourselves into difficulty. If the thought enters our head that the one to whom we are about to give brought this poverty upon himself needlessly, and therefore withhold our hand, we should perhaps think again. If we give selectively, as we should, we must give prayerfully.

28.28. This is similar to 28.12. However it looks forward to the dawning of a new day when oppressors will cease from the land and righteousness flourish once again.

Proverbs 29

29.1. Of course, the Pharaoh of Exodus 7-14, is a perfect example of this proverb. Eventually, if after many efforts to reclaim a person it is to no avail, then we must give up attempts at correction and leave a person to his own fate, praying that the Lord might yet in some other way change him. There will come a time, without repentance, that the evil will have been done once too often, and it will be too late. For its inevitability once that occurs there is no medicine. From that destruction there will be no appeal.

29.2. Although fallen human nature does not like to be restrained, nevertheless there is that remaining image of God within that appreciates parameters of behaviour to which we do well to conform. When there are national and international laws in accordance with the Lord’s commandments and true justice is dispensed then countries prosper under His blessing and the people, for the most part, recognise the rightness of it.

29.3. The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) illustrates the truth of this proverb and while Solomon may not have been involved with harlots he did have many wives of other religions and may have felt some tinge of conscience himself in this matter. He did not live to see his son’s rejection of wisdom when Rehoboam “forsook the counsel

of the old men, which they had given him, and consulted with the young men which had grown up with him” with devastating results (1 Kings 12.8).

29.4. Again, personal experience as a prosperous monarch under the hand of the Lord would have led Solomon to reflect much on the methods of wise governance. Once bribery is admitted at court all absolute standards are overthrown and it will be replicated at every level throughout the land with destabilising results.

29.5. The intention may be good, but so deeply ingrained is pride that the neighbour will jump to wrong conclusions of himself, and even misinterpret the “kind” words of his neighbour, and it may lead to his fall. There is no escaping the entrapment of a net and it renders the victim powerless.

29.6. A snare is a trap, and might be a net. One transgression leads to another on a downward spiral and even the first step on that downward path may trap the wrongdoer. A clear conscience is a liberating thing, setting the heart free to sing and rejoice. “Be filled with the Spirit...making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5. 18-19).

29.7. We use the expression even today, “we don’t want to know.” We do know, but we pretend not to. We see this attitude displayed at Luke 10.32 where the Levite, more so than the priest before him, “when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.” It is good to go to the root of a problem and seek to solve it, or alleviate it, fundamentally.

29.8. The very first psalm opens with this allusion to what was evidently a very prevalent attitude among the Jews:- “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.” Pouring scorn is never a kind way of opposing a person’s views. If that scorn is poured upon a person’s faith it is debilitating and must be said to be pouring scorn upon God Himself. “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25.40).

29.9. There are some who, terrier like, will never let a matter rest and it is a foolish thing to do. No matter how a wise man handles it, there will never be a satisfactory conclusion. It is likely to prove a waste of time.

29.10. How the Saviour exemplifies this proverb! The wicked sought His life because He told them the truth. “But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth” (John 8.40), He said. But, in willing obedience to the Saviour’s invitation, the just seek Him that they might live by faith. “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11. 28-30).

29.11. There are many situations in which it is not wise to reveal all one's thoughts. In the discipline of negotiating; in marshalling an argument; in hearing a matter from another side and in many other ways it is wise to keep silent until the matters are well introduced.

29.12. As we have seen in 29.4. once a principle of evil is admitted it opens the way to all manner of other errors and vices. If there were to be just the smallest evil in God Himself, it would be the end of Him. It is precisely because He is absolutely holy that He is from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 90.2) and none can stay His hand (Daniel 4.35). As a ruler, so His court. Unfortunately "like people, like priest" (Hosea 4.9) was the norm, at one period of Israel's history at least, when it should have been the other way round; but only when the priest is godly.

29.13. When all is said and done we shall all die. As we sometimes say, "life is too short for animosity." "They shall lie down alike in the dust" (Job 21.26). "All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked." (Ecclesiastes 9.2). The thought here is not of death, but of life; that all men receive natural light from the Lord, that is to say sight and ordinary understanding. Spiritual understanding, like faith, is not given to all men (2 Thessalonians 3.2).

29.14. This conveys the opposite of 29. 4,12. As long as there is natural justice and good laws, so long will the Lord perpetuate the life of that nation.

29.15. It is a mark of loving care to impart discipline. "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not. But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons" (Hebrews 12.7-80).

29.16. However much evil may seem to triumph on all sides it will be relatively short lived. It seemed a long time to the psalmist to contemplate the prosperity of the wicked but at last he understood their end, How are they brought to desolation, as in a moment!" (Psalm 73.3,17,19).

29.17. The early discipline of life lays down the parameters of behaviour which the child, as the father of the man, will always be disposed to follow.

29.18. Supremely, that vision is imparted by the gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. It inspires so to live as to inherit eternal life. In lesser matters also the principle always holds good that to work for some desired end a leader must convincingly and glowingly present the advantages of whatever is being aimed at to those who labour.

Law is contrasted with vision and by inference the first five books of the Bible (the law) with prophecy. By this verse the Holy Spirit would thus reveal that the Old Testament scriptures were still in the state of composition, as there might be no

contemporary, relevant revelation. (Such was the case in the four hundred years at the conclusion of the writing of the Old Testament and the commencement of the New - the people perished with a terrible destruction.) A speaking prophet (such as David's Nathan) or a writing prophet (Samuel and David himself) and the later writing prophets also, would, if heeded, keep the nation looking to their God and thereby inspire them to new and higher attainments and understanding. This is what Solomon's father David did by his psalms and what Solomon was aware of doing. Failing this, and indeed always and everywhere relevant, to keep such scriptures as were already available would be sufficient for the day to keep a believer on the right path.

29.19. Surly servants were the bane of any society which was dependent upon them and here the scene envisaged is bringing a slave to book for his action. Guilty he may be, but he is not going to answer. Paul rejoices in the phrase, "a servant of Jesus Christ" (for example Romans 1.1) and the Lord Jesus Christ kindly puts our whole relationship with Him (though we serve Him) on the wonderful footing of friendship, as he did Abraham. "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known to you" (John 15. 14-15).

There is a link between this and the previous verse. Our Prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ, has set before us His words not only to correct us but as our vision and inspiration, lifting us by such a high, upward calling to things above (Philippians 3.14).

29.20. Believers must strive to choose their words carefully and with forethought not speaking rashly in hastiness, temper or criticism. It is difficult to withdraw words once uttered and, in some situations, long after we have forgotten them, they will still rankle with the one who was hurt. One rash moment brought upon Moses, meek though he normally was, the punishment of not being allowed to enter the promised land (Numbers 20.12).

29.21. If the privileges of the intimacy of sonship are bestowed upon the child of a slave, as they might be if brought up with a man's own children, or if he has no heir, whether intentionally (in the latter case) or unintentionally he will take over. Such is human nature that even in a church fellowship there are those who "given an inch will take a mile" as we say and usurp such offices or duties for which, maybe, they are not suited, by default. That is not quite what is envisaged in this proverb where a person (unsuitable by rank but not necessarily by ability) is unintentionally, perhaps, trained to be above his station. In the Lord we are all gifted for one place or another in the church and we should seek to fulfil that ministry and that ministry only (1 Corinthians 12. 14-27,31; Ephesians 4.16).

29.22. A believer should never in the church or in his private capacity stir up strife or abound in transgression. It therefore follows that he/she should neither be angry nor furious.

29.23. Pride and honour are here contrasted. It is very wonderful that the Lord honours His servants. "Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name...I will deliver him, and honour him" (Psalm 91. 14-15). But the Lord sets His face against all forms of pride. I select just one verse from among many, for it is a vein that runs throughout the whole Bible. "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts" (Luke 1.51).

29.24. To be a thief is to be in breach of the 8th commandment (Exodus 20.15) and there is no way that a person may flout one of the ten commandments without endangering his own soul. Whether the cursing he hears is that of his even more debased partner when things go wrong or because it is his normal way of speech (so low has he descended to have such a partner) or whether the cursing is that of the people he has harmed as he escapes or overhears subsequently matters not. He knows what is said about him or in his company, keeps it to himself, and there it festers in his soul. May it bring us, should we be in that situation, to conviction of sin, confession of our sinfulness and the forsaking of our past life!

29.25. The Gospel writer John gives two very good examples of the fear of man bringing a snare. It is a trap which detains them from following the Lord fully and puts them at the mercy of His opponents. "He is of age; ask him: he shall speak for himself. These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. Therefore said his parents, He is of age; ask him" (John 9.21-23). "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12.42-43). The margin gives "set on high" as an alternative to "safe." Once again it is apposite to read Psalm 91.14.

29.26. It is possible that the quotations from John above are an illustration of this proverb. Here were people (in a bad sense) seeking the favour of the ruling party at the expense of their true wellbeing and it will turn out to be the judgment of the Lord against them. However, this proverb might be intended in a good sense that there is a time to seek the favour of those in authority and that the Saviour, who is our wisdom (1 Corinthians 1.30) imparts that ability to make the distinction of the appropriate time.

29.27. Whose side are you on? The same behaviour will appear approved or anathema according to whose side we are on. If we are believers then, however much the haters

of the Saviour's cause may be disposed to like us personally, for His sake they will hate us. Just how abominable the upright in his way is to the wicked is seen today, for example, in the outbursts of those who are for redefining marriage against those who uphold it. It was never more fully seen than in the opposition to the Saviour of the religious leaders of His time. "Pilate said unto them, Why, what evil hath he done? And they cried out the more exceedingly, Crucify him" (Mark 15.14).

Proverbs 30

30.1. The words of this and the following chapter are described as prophecies. They are not the words of Solomon himself. We do not know who Agur and Lemuel were. Maybe these words were added by Solomon himself from earlier authors as something he particularly appreciated or maybe by the men of Hezekiah (25.1), perhaps from court records of men who lived subsequently to Solomon. We just do not know when they lived.

The prophecy of Agur was passed on to Ithiel and Ucal, perhaps his sons or perhaps his disciples, to be the custodians of them. The passing on of instruction from one generation to another is fundamental to the continuance of the gospel. "When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice" (2 Timothy 1.5). "The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2.2). Certainly the Holy Spirit has here wonderfully preserved what He has given. The prophecy is not much different in length from that of Obadiah which is preserved in its own right, whereas this is appended. We might say that the Holy Spirit has "rescued" these words from obscurity by arranging for them to be included. It is, in that case, worth observing that the Holy Spirit revealed these precious words to a "holy man of God" (2 Peter 1.21) whose origins are unknown and obscure..

30.2-6. It highlights the heavenly origin of these words when they are prefaced with Agur's description of himself as untaught and unlearned. It means that he can only have been taught and moved by the Holy Ghost Himself and have meditated on the testimonies given to him (Ps119.99). Amos describes himself, "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son" and, interestingly, he is moved by the same Holy Ghost to speak in a similar way to later verses of Agur when he used the expression "for three transgressions and for four" a number of times.

"Who hath ascended up into heaven or descended?" Though this is a similar expression to that in Deuteronomy 30.12-13 alluded to in Romans 10.6-8, it is not identical; for the contrast there is between ascending into heaven and descending into the deep. This speaks of heaven only. Rather this is a precious jewel concerning the Lord Jesus Christ who Himself said (John 3.13) "no man hath ascended up to heaven,

but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.” So explicit are these words concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and none other that it seems that the Lord Jesus Christ owned these very words of Agur as the unique description of Himself which He himself takes up. They prophesy of Him as do the words which follow.

Here then is a wonderful revelation of the Saviour; of His coming to earth. He was there in heaven before descending. He was the Creator, and Agur is moved especially to speak of that which displays unimaginable power and skilfulness, the controlling of the wind and the containing of the waters. The entirety of the created order (“all the ends of the earth”) is viewed as His in these few majestic words.

Solomon had spoken of the wisdom which is Christ’s in 3.19; 8.22-31, and sonship could be rightly inferred from 8.30-31, but here it is delightfully clear. He is declaring that Jehovah most certainly has a Son but that His name is not yet revealed. Surely this verse would not have been omitted when beginning at Moses and all the prophets the Saviour expounded unto the two on the Emmaus road in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24.27).

Did Agur pre-date David perhaps and did the statement “every word of God is pure” originate with him by the Holy Spirit? It matters not, but, while these words are often quoted, they do not occur anywhere else in exactly the same form. Look, if you will, at Psalms 12.6; 18.30; 19.8; 119.140. The theme that God is a shield to those who trust Him is frequent, especially in the Psalms, but even in this the Holy Spirit seems to have enabled this prophet to have his own distinctive way of saying it.

It was Moses who first declared, “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deuteronomy 4.2). The Bible virtually concludes with this theme, “If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life...” (Revelation 22. 18-19). Consider also Deuteronomy 12.32. No threat is attached in Moses to failure to keep these words. But there is in Revelation and there is here, so we may observe that the Holy Spirit has introduced a new dimension, that of reproof, into this teaching through Agur.

30.7-9. What follows is cast more in the form of the proverbs to which we have become accustomed. It may be that the prophetic verses at the commencement of the chapter entitle the rest to be likewise called prophecies. It is also true that the word “prophecy” was used not only of foretelling the future but also of forth telling the gospel. However, each prophet had to pass the stringent test of Deuteronomy 18.22. If his prophecies were mainly for a long time in the future then there had to be some

that could be verified immediately. Or, if his main ministry was preaching, then to have the name of a prophet the Lord had to have bestowed upon him the knowledge of some verifiable event before its occurrence which he had proclaimed and for which he had been recognised.

This faithful brother now asks the Lord two importunate requests. Though personal to him, the Holy Spirit has caused them to be written and preserved for our benefit. What are these two important things? To be kept from lying and idolatry (vain, empty, powerless figments of man's imagination). And to be given a kind sufficiency, neither too much nor too little, such as would keep him from sinful pride or sinful disobedience to the commandments.

30.10. Doeg (1 Samuel 21.7; 22.7-19) in accusing David to Saul is the most high profile Biblical example of this proverb, except that David did not curse him. But the results of Doeg's actions were truly terrible and we may certainly observe his moral guilt. Though it does not cover quite the same ground, Romans 14.4 is certainly apposite. "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth."

30.11-14. It is going to be a feature of Agur's style to speak of three notable matters which he emphasises and makes memorable by augmenting to four. The fourth is not an afterthought and was always intended – it is a way of stimulating memory. But this verse introduces four straight proverbs without any augmentation, of which the first concerns disobedience to one of the ten commandments and the second self-righteousness. Bearing in mind the fact that self-righteousness is one of the greatest hindrances to believing the gospel (for what person thinking he/she is perfectly all right in the sight of God and that in fairness God could have expected no more of them will turn to be saved?) this is of very considerable significance in these subsequent lists of four.

A person guilty of transgressing as per 28.24 will also be guilty of this proverb. It is the link of "curse" which has led to this observation that the cursing even of parents is not beyond what some will stoop to. The constant blessings which our parents bestowed upon us should be the theme of our thankfulness to God for them in every prayer of ours; even after they have gone we should bless the Lord for their memory and for the continuing blessing we enjoy because of their early influences upon our lives.

We are deceived when we think we are pure in the sight of the Lord God. We learned at 20.9, "Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?" Isaiah preaches, "Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!" (Isaiah 5.21)

The word “generation” does not here mean those who live within, say, a thirty year period (though any given generation might be characterised by many such minded people) but in the sense in which the Lord Jesus Christ used it in Matthew 24.34 of those who have this specific thing generated, created within them and eminently characterising them. The “generation” is then those who have something in common – they are made, generated, that way.

So we have had those who dishonour their parents, and those who, being impure, think they are pure. Next we have the proud; not only proud, but aggressively so in their demeanour. How ill-fitting it is for a believer to be like that when his dear Saviour was Himself humble and taught, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5.5). As an antidote for pride read again Philippians 2.3-11.

Finally in this group of four, attention is drawn to those whose words are cruel, biting instruments to assassinate character. Especially the character of those who cannot answer back, having not the intellectual attainments or the status to reply on their own behalf or the financial ability to sue for defamation of character. Christians are to build one another up in the faith not to destroy them. “The whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love” (Ephesians 4.16).

30.15-16. The horseleach has never sucked enough blood, so this memorable example fitly introduces four other things which are never satisfied with what they have. Death claims thousands daily. Many across the world discover they cannot have children. Earth soaks up water at an alarming rate and fire is difficult to bring under control once it has got a grip. Water (the flood) and fire (the final destruction of the earth) (2 Peter 3.6-7) remind us of total destruction and who wants to be like the horseleach, the grave and the barren womb? “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6.6). The desire for things we do not have and cannot attain destroys our peace of mind, damages our real (not imagined) spheres of usefulness, saps our energies and is unruly, like the fire breaking out periodically, to cause dissatisfaction with our lot.

30.17. It is probable that this is what Ham was guilty of. It certainly looks like that when we compare Genesis 9.22 with verses 24-25. The word “mocking” is explicitly used of Ishmael in Genesis 21 and the results of that mocking were catastrophic for him (Genesis 21. 8-19). That is the earliest mention of mocking in the scripture and the first mention is definitive for the rest. Mocking brings shame (Job 11.3). The proverb is vividly put, declaring the logical conclusion of such an attitude - an ignominious death and the body left to rot.

30.18-19. The Holy Spirit invites us to consider four aspects of God's creative skill, perhaps if we are untaught in these things, to whet our appetites to look for other examples. Consider the majesty of a bird using the thermals - those invisible currents - and the structure of the wings which enjoy them. The sinuous, effortless ability of even that creature condemned to go on its belly and "eat" dust (Genesis 3.14). The emphasis is not on the skill of man in building the ship but the wonders of the deep it encounters, thinking particularly of the mighty waves. Probably courting (the use of "maid" suggests this) is meant; when delightful courtesies may be expressed, springing up perhaps for the first time in the heart of the young couple and pleasantly observed by an older generation who see that it bodes well. "The works of the LORD are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein" (Psalm 111.2). The whole of Psalm 139 is an exposition of the words, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it" (Psalm 139.6).

30.20-23. Verse 21 speaks of things which disquiet the earth and one cannot help thinking that verse 20 is the thought that sparks off this theme. We live in a fallen world but these things must be odious to the Lord if they disquiet the earth. If it is not enough that adultery is disobedience to the 7th commandment, the attitude which adds insult to injury by claiming that no wrong has been done compounds it all. The rule of a servant implies not that a good, true and fit person might not arise (as Jephthah in Judges 11 or David as he was falsely claimed to be in 1 Samuel 25.11); but it speaks of that usurping by subtle scheming of one with a servant mentality, with no inkling of how to rule. Much is hinted at here. His likely incompetence, self-seeking, pleasure seeking, and promotion of cronies all of which demonstrate his total unfitness for the power his ambition has achieved. Let us seek simply to serve our generation by the will of God (Acts 13.36).

The earth is disquieted and its gracious provision depleted by those who live to eat. The fool, whether he be a court jester, or the one who says, "There is no God" (Psalm 14.1), or some position in between, who is satisfied in his folly and seeks no manner of improvement is unbearable.

An odious woman has no regard for her husband's best interest, being hateful towards him and his affairs. The exact opposite is what we shall be studying in chapter 31. Peter spells out the wifeliness that is a blessing, so far from being odious. "Whose adorning...let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands..." (1 Peter 3.3-5).

Look how Hagar behaved (Genesis 16. 4-5) when she thought she had power.

30. 24-28. It is an encouragement to little, unimportant people like ourselves that by the gifting of our heavenly Father we may have wisdom like these small creatures. Theirs is a wisdom of instinct whereas ours is the gift of the Saviour to His people who ask Him (1 Corinthians 1.30; James 1. 5-6). The ants have wisdom to prepare in advance and lay up stores in case of scarcity. They use their time well. This is a believer's first wisdom.

Secondly, It does not matter how feeble we are if we make the Lord Jesus Christ our hiding place, and build on Him as our foundation (Psalm 61.2; 78.35; 89.26; Isaiah 32.2; 1 Corinthians 10.4). Our King Jesus is in heaven and is invisible but we venture into the world as those with sure guidance, individual by individual to our daily work; church by church to the preaching of the gospel.

Once or twice in scripture the spider is an example of a bad thing yet it also provides here a good example. Like the swallow who has made her nest (Psalm 84.3) on the altars in God's house, a spider may take its hold in positions where no man would be so daring. So may the little ones (John 13.33) of the Saviour's kingdom make a bold, even daring, stand in high places of authority and the corridors of power as did Moses with Pharaoh and the apostle Paul of whom the Lord said, "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9.15).

30. 29-31. In an elegant transition we move from the little, insignificant things to the "kings" of their sorts, illustrative of how the Lord's people, kings as they are unto God (Revelation 1.6), may exercise four important characteristics in their lives unto the Saviour.

Firstly, the strength of a lion. We have already had (28.1), "the righteous are bold as a lion", in contradistinction to the wicked who "flee when no man pursueth." Let us continue our Christian life as Abraham who "was strong in faith, giving glory to God...being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform" (Romans 4.20-21).

Secondly, speed. "Study to show thyself approved unto God" (2 Timothy 2.15) where the word "study" translates "hasten, give all speed" in the sense of give diligence. In 2 Peter (verses 5 & 10) we have "giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue..." and "give diligence to make your calling and election sure" and often where "diligent" and "diligence" appear in the New Testament it is this same word "hasten" which is being translated. Let us attend speedily to the pursuit of our faith.

We turn to the words of the Lord in Job 39.1-4 for help in understanding the significance of goats here, when, as we know goats are also used to illustrate something bad (Matthew 25.32). What is being illustrated is the believers'

independence of man and dependence upon God. The wild goats, like the wild ass (Job 39.5) are free, untrammelled and unrestricted. "If the Son...shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8.36). Read Job 39.1-11 to drink in the sense of freedom and independence which the Lord hath bestowed upon beasts which have no soul. How free therefore are believers to serve the Lord from the heart, being constrained by grace, through pardon by the blood of the atonement, to be utterly devoted to Him and to serve Him without fear.

Fourthly. In Proverbs 16.32 we had, "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city." Believers rule over their own spirits by the power of the Holy Spirit and constantly exercise self-control in all matters.

So, the four comely things that are illustrative of the lives of Christians in verses 29-31 are strength of faith, diligence in pursuing single-mindedly our calling, dependence upon God alone and therefore no fear of man and self-control.

30.32-33. Finally, Agur's words by the Holy Spirit conclude with two frequently met with situations and direct our meditations as to our reactions. One concerns our own behaviour and the other that of others.

If we have caught ourselves acting proudly or thinking evil thoughts immediate repentance is what is required before the matter goes any further. "So foolish was I and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee" (Psalm 73.22). To avoid adding to our folly let us cease immediately, pull ourselves up with a start and humble ourselves in repentance.

Two vigorous illustrations, the churning to make butter and the deliberate causing of nosebleed, churning and wringing, powerfully remind us of the life changing, or at least painful, consequences of the wanton stirring up of trouble which we may come across in life. Let the Lord Jesus have the last word. "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God" (Matthew 5.9).

Proverbs 31

31.1. While Paul writes, inspired by the Holy Spirit, "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man" (1 Timothy 2.12) he means in a formal and public way in the congregation, as the passage 1 Corinthians 14.34-35 shows. However, the mother may teach her child and, as the child is the father of the man, such words will very likely have a profound influence. Here is a word from the Lord given to a woman for her son and for the church at large.

It would seem possible that Lemuel was not a child when these words were uttered to him but already a king given over to wine and women. If so, it is not difficult to see how an older and wiser Solomon would have found these words to ring true to his own experience and therefore he was glad to afford them a place in his writings. We cannot be sure that this is how it happened, and it does not matter, for it is the topic that is all important.

31.2-9. There are many shades of meaning that could be given to this questioning “what?” For myself, it seems relevant to refer it to the first two occasions in the scriptures that the word “what” as a question (it occurs as a non-question in Genesis 2.19) appears. The Lord addresses the woman, “What is this that thou hast done?” (Genesis 3.13) He addresses Cain, “What hast thou done?” (Genesis 4.10) It would be a perfectly possible understanding to see here that Lemuel’s mother is confronting her son, the king, in the midst of his harlotry and heavy drinking with his lords.

Her plea is irresistible. My son, have you not dishonoured yourself and your office? Have you not dishonoured the mother who bore you? Have you not dishonoured the Lord whose answer to my prayers you were? It would be a salutary reminder to us if we do wrong, that we wrong ourselves and our employment, our parents and family and, supremely, the Lord God Himself.

The more responsible our work, the more important it is that our minds are not clouded by alcohol. It adds to the disgrace if we indulge in such conviviality with colleagues, perhaps rendering the whole establishment incompetent and giving to it a bad reputation.

If that establishment be a king’s court, the court of justice, then justice is impoverished. Forgetfulness of the finer points of detail of the law and perverting the course of justice becomes entrenched – “any of the afflicted” is a term that suggests as much.

If strong drink is to have any place at all let it be for the swift reviving of “him that is ready to perish” whether physically or emotionally; and wine “that maketh glad the heart of man” to the sad. Let it be largesse not wantonness. Let it minister to the building up, not the ruination, of the poor afflicted one.

Where there has been drunken incompetence let there be words of wisdom to rescue those for whom miscarriage of justice is bidding fair to lead to death; intervene, speak up on their behalf, and uphold and defend them.

Such is the way to redeem a lost cause; the lost cause of the monarch, his courtiers and his subjects.

31.10. Now follows an acrostic. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and each verse to the end of the chapter begins with each successive letter. It is not merely a stylistic convention, but an aid to memorisation. It is brilliantly translated. Without any attempt to reproduce the acrostic element in English, the logical flow of the passage is not thereby diminished.

These words are the gift of the Holy Spirit. Maybe the words originated with Lemuel's mother and king Lemuel under the Spirit's guidance wove them into this form. Maybe Lemuel's mother learned them herself in the acrostic form. The language is heightened to match the sublime subject matter of such great importance to the mutual benefit of the relationship between men and their wives. This passage speaks to our day about the achievements of marriage, where two are better than one (Ecclesiastes 4.9), where work is the foundation of the marriage and where children are the fruit of a secure and long standing marriage.

The question, "Who can find a virtuous woman?" is not asked in any demeaning way, as if this was well-nigh an impossibility. Rather, it is of great encouragement - to a man to expect to find such, and, if he does, what a great impetus to all his affairs, family, business and spiritual it will be; and to the woman to model herself in principle on these noble qualities which, while they are obtainable outside of Christ, are supremely attainable to one seeking closely the wisdom which is in our Lord Jesus Christ. A believing woman might model herself on these qualities and enhance them in conjunction with Philippians 4. 8-9. "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you."

"The price of wisdom is above rubies" (Job 28.18; and it is very similarly expressed in Proverbs 3.15). Some things are beyond price; no monetary value can be placed on them; they are precious and irreplaceable to the one who exercises them and to the one who benefits from them.

31.11. The heart of her husband is her first concern. By which is meant his affections and his inner, emotional well-being. His aims are secure with her; his faults are between him and her alone; their mutual love is not polluted from another source. "No need of spoil" is a telling phrase. Spoils are the entitlements of a victorious army. An unmarried man might legitimately take as spoils of war a beautiful woman (Deuteronomy 21. 10-11). But after a long absence a soldier with such a wife at home will not be tempted, for his thoughts are all towards his virtuous and faithful wife. There is no need of any provision outside the home environment; and while his work may take him away his heart and her heart are secure in their love for one another.

31.12. Her input to his life is positive, not merely refraining from evil. It begins with her care and nurture of his inner welfare and extends to outward and public affairs. In such a relationship the subservience of the woman and the dominance of the man is mitigated in a wonderful manifestation of the relationship between the believer, the church and the Saviour which answers the end of marriage. Whereas in Genesis 3.16 the Lord ruled that, “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” the fulfilment of these things here is mutual and, by the loving endorsement in the scriptures of the approval of God Himself, the rule is greatly softened.

31.13. It is very much an issue today as to where our food supplies are sourced from. Part of her remit is the ordering of her materials from wherever she can get the best deal, or in this instance, the best material. So behind her labours are the sourcing of information as to the best available material and provisions which her industrious lifestyle enables her to provide. “She worketh willingly with her hands.” What follows is not only the description of elevated “independent” womanhood but also a strong work ethic for the administration and example of her family, and the household of family servants. Her sphere is not merely the home for she may consider the purchase of a field (31.16) and make a unilateral decision.

31.14. While the issue today is to source locally it was then the ability to purchase the appropriate supplies from wherever the best could be obtained. In an elegant metaphor she is likened to a stately ship which conveys goods from afar; she provides the very best.

31.15. However, this is not the indolence of wealth or position. Her work begins early to organise the food supply for the day for as many as her household numbers. She is an organiser with all that entails; for she knows early on in the day what supplies she will need to order and bring in – nothing is done in a last moment rush.

31.16. There is a telling description in Genesis 24.10 concerning Abraham’s steward that, “all the goods of his master were in his hand.” In Genesis 39.4-6 Potiphar in making Joseph his steward left “all that he had in Joseph’s hand; and he knew not ought he had.” Such is the purpose of having a steward and “it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4.2). Ministers are “stewards of the mysteries of God” and all believers are to be “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4.10). So we may study this picture and think of ourselves in relation to the provisions we supply to our fellow believers. This wife organised the home and every matter that related to its welfare and efficiency. While not having the office of steward she incorporated all stewardship disciplines into her married status. As the bride of Christ the church’s members should act likewise in spiritual things. She did not indulge in gossip - it is passed over in silence. There was no time for that. Her energies were put to nobler use, as ours should be. Read again at this juncture Matthew 25. 14-30. With the resources of her own industry at her disposal and the

trust placed in her, she uses her own discretion and purchases a field and organises its cultivation. Though the resources are of her own earning, yet they are for the family good.

31.17. Though organisation is her forte this verse suggests that she is not averse to giving a physical lead; perhaps demonstrating how and where things should be planted or, whenever necessary, doing it all herself. This lady is no workshy gadabout.

31.18. She examines the quality of her purchases when they arrive to see that they pass muster. At whatever time they are anticipated she is waiting for them, to check them before it is too late to return them.

31.19-20. As was much more the practice in days gone by she was a “manufacturer,” using her hands in all manner of tasks to benefit the family and the poor. The passage implies, in the expression “she stretcheth out her hand,” that despite her status and nobility she is gentle and kind in her approach to those who are less well-off than she is.

31.21-22. On the other hand she produces exquisitely made warm clothing for the cold weather; not luxurious, for luxury implies that a thing is to no purpose, but eminently serviceable. Her husband is doubtless “proud” to be seen in it and “proud” of the elegance of her own clothing style too.

31.23. Her husband shares in the role of the judiciary, being an elder, but carries his role with aplomb and knows that everything about him, his dress, his bearing, his health matches the importance of his work and is enhanced by his wife’s provision. Everything takes its proper place; the marriage is for the home; the home is for the city state; local government is for the nation. “His foundations are in the holy mountains. The LORD loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob” (Psalm 87.1-2). When everything is in its proper perspective the mutual service and love within the home supplies the benefit and credibility of the church.

31.24-25. Not only does she provide first and foremost for the home but has a cottage industry. It is successful and profit-making. And then, with a lovely turn of phrase, notwithstanding all her elegance of style, what counts most is the elegance of her demeanour. It is every bit as distinctive as the clothing she makes. “Strength and honour” are her clothing. While Peter describes ornaments (1 Peter 3. 1-6) and uses the illustration tellingly, Lemuel here speaks of principal clothing not ornaments. “She shall rejoice in time to come.” In retirement? In glory? When she observes these things replicated in subsequent generations? “All things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8.28).

31.26-27. Not only is she practical but she exercises wisdom and kindness. What a fruitful combination this is! She casts a kindly eye over “the ways of her household.”

That is over their behaviour and their problems. Her influence is pastoral within that sphere. She works hard; they work hard. They take their lead from her in love.

31.28. When our children have grown up and perhaps raised children themselves and have compared what they have achieved with their children with what we achieved with them, if they then arise up and call us blessed that is a job well done, It is not always the case, else notice would not have been taken of it here. Her husband has nothing but commendation. Indeed we shall rejoice in time to come if this be the case with us. May we do better than we know and the time to come declare it (1 Corinthians 3.13).

31.29. Earlier in our studies I have alluded to the expression, “the child is the father of the man.” The characteristics honed in childhood, the habits inculcated, to a very large extent become the established norm when that child grows up. So we have had here a description of a woman in her prime. This is a daughter where the child is the mother of the woman. She has grown up, but she had her own earlier childhood. Let us seek to bring up our children in the nurture of the faith which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Let us teach them ways of living which are consistent with His ways. We cannot all rise to the top of our profession but a believing, loving, industrious, kind, gentle and wise wife (or a single lady who can fulfil within her sphere most of these roles) will achieve better than she knows and will be approved by God and man.

31.30. Fundamental to all her achievement is her faith in the Saviour. True beauty is the “beauty of holiness” (1 Chronicles 16.29; Psalm 29.2). It is inward, and is immune from flattery.

31.31. And on this note the book of Proverbs closes, that she will freely enjoy the fruit of her labours. She will be praised by her children, by all at large and receive honourable mention “in the gates” where justice is dispensed. She is the epitome of all that is law abiding and her standards uphold the fabric of society and, indeed, under Christ, within the household of the Lord, the visible effects of her unseen influence will continue into glory. It is indeed a fitting end to this book of Christ’s wisdom and a welcome antidote to the Jewish attitude to women which came to prevail in Christ’s day, as well as to the feminism of our own.