

Introducing the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon

Except for humanistic, critical scholars, who tend to doubt almost everything about the Bible, the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon are generally attributed to King Solomon. They are the final three Books of Poetry; and the last of these, Song of Solomon, is by far the most poetic of all five.

Because of its poetic and romantic idealism, some believe that Solomon wrote Song of Solomon when he was young. Likewise, because of the maturity of the wisdom in Proverbs, this book is attributed to his mature years. And by the same token Ecclesiastes, because of its cynicism, is believed to have been written near the end of his life, when he was burned out, cynical, and out of fellowship with God. This, of course, is all inference with little evidence; but it is reasonable and interesting. At any rate, these three are among of the most often-quoted books of the Bible, and Song of Solomon is the perfect closing for the Books of Poetry.

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The Poetry, Book 3

Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of condensed spiritual, moral, and ethical truth, directed primarily at the young, to enable them to avoid destructive pitfalls, and to grow up wise, godly, and free. Of course, the book also applies to people of all ages.

The key character in the book is Wisdom, spoken of as a person--in fact, as a woman--greatly to be desired and pursued¹. Wisdom, as a person, even speaks directly to us in Chapters 8 and 9; and, in this way, the eternal Christ speaks to us, for his wisdom cannot be separated from his divine Person.

These pithy, axiomatic, gems of distilled wisdom are called proverbs, and the book consists of 560 such proverbs; they were chosen from 3,000 that were spoken or written by Solomon in his lifetime². Many of the proverbs

¹ Jesus also spoke of wisdom as a woman (Matt 11:19, Lk 7:35).

² I Kings 4:32.

are written in the form of couplets, in which the second line contrasts with the first, or expands upon it (e. g. "A wise son maketh a glad father; but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother"; and, "The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich; and He addeth no sorrow with it." The Book of Proverbs is largely the work of King Solomon, in the same way that the Book of Psalms is largely the work of his father, King David.

Solomon's Wisdom. Solomon's wisdom was a direct gift from God³. This granting of wisdom to Solomon was a permanent enabling, and is not to be confused with the New Testament gift of "the word of wisdom⁴." The New Testament "word of wisdom" is the momentary granting of one small, selected, transient, bit of the wisdom of God, spoken by a believer to meet a momentary need. It is spoken, and then it is gone; but not so with the wisdom of Solomon--he was given broad-based, supernatural, wisdom for his lifetime (even though he consistently violated it himself toward the end of his life). Solomon's permanent gift of wisdom was apparently unique; there is no record of anyone else in the Bible so gifted by God.

Solomon's Knowledge. In addition to wisdom, Solomon also possessed knowledge beyond all others in his day, and this he acquired by study. With the help of God, he was a diligent scholar with advanced knowledge of botany, zoology, ornithology, ichthyology, herpetology, and other academic fields of study⁵.

Solomon, the Walking Contradiction. The amazing contradiction of Solomon's life, and its great tragedy, is that in his latter years he abandoned his own inspired wisdom, and lived in opposition to it. God had warned him repeatedly to take care not to do this, and even warned him to avoid the most likely means of his downfall: pagan women. God, of course, was right about that; but Solomon took 1,000 women, most of them pagan, beginning with his first wife, who was Pharaoh's daughter. Embracing these lovely women, he eventually embraced their pagan gods, and worshipped them to his everlasting shame. Does this negate the truth of what he wrote? Of course not. Like Samson, he was an instrument of God; but his life is definitely not one for us to emulate.

Concerning Context. Except for Chapters 1-9, 30 and 31, there is usually no context; in this way Proverbs is unique. The bulk of the book (Chapts 10-29) consists of individual proverbs; and, although some relate to

³ I Kings 4:29-34; II Chron 1:7-12.

⁴ I Corinthians 12:8.

⁵ I Kings 4:29-34.

others, and a few must be taken in small groups, the vast majority of these proverbs should be taken as stand-alone statements of truth.

Divisions. Some commentators see Proverbs, like the Pentateuch and the Psalms, as being divided into 5 parts: Chapt 1-9; Chapt 10-24; Chapt 25-29; Chapt 30; and Chapt 31. To me this seems unnatural and contrived; and, as to what it may mean to us in practical terms, I have no idea.

A. Author.

1. It seems clear that Solomon himself is the author (but almost certainly not the scribe) of Chapters 1-24.

2. Chapters 25-29, also the words of Solomon, appear to have been added to the original 24 chapters by the good King Hezekiah, about 300 years later, from an existing collection of the sayings of Solomon.

3. Chapter 30 ascribes itself to "Agur the son of Jakeh," and chapter 31 ascribes itself to a "King Lemuel" as being lessons taught him by his mother. Some consider these to be symbolic names; other commentators believe them to be names of other ancient writers, whose writings Solomon included in Proverbs. None of this sounds like Solomon, until one consults the Talmud (the voluminous Jewish commentaries on the Old Testament Scriptures). According to the Talmud, King Solomon was known by six names: Solomon, Jedediah (II Sam 12:24-25), Koheleth, Agur, the son of Jakeh, and Lemuel. This number becomes five if the comma after "Agur" is removed. The symbolic meaning of "Jakeh" is "hearkening." Thus, the name, "Agur," could stand alone, with "son of Jakeh" ['hearkening'] as a sixth name; or, "Agur" could be combined with "son of hearkening" using the symbolic form of "Jakeh," reducing the names to five.

Also, in all this speculation, we must remember that the ancient Hebrew had no punctuation marks, no articles ("the," "a," etc), did not differentiate between capital and lower case letters, and that punctuation marks, capitalization and articles are added by translators. All this can quickly become confusing as it is impossible to be certain, and I shan't pursue it any farther. However, considering all this, I believe the following: that the Talmud can be trusted in this matter; that the number of Solomon's names was six, divorcing "Agur" from "son of Jakeh"; and that Chapters 30 and 31 are the words of Solomon, no matter who put the pen to the parchment.

4. Authorship Summary. In light of all this, it appears to me that **all** of the Book of Proverbs consists of the sayings of Solomon, written down during his lifetime (Chapters 1-24), added to during the time of King Hezekiah (Chapters 25-29), and added to at an unknown date by unknown editors

(Chapters 30-31). If the last chapter is the work of Solomon, as appears almost certain, then it actually reflects the wisdom of his famous mother, Bathsheba. This is an extremely interesting possibility.

NOTES:

a. The critical scholars usually teach that none of Proverbs is the work of Solomon; rather, they insist, they are but reflections of the wisdom of the Greek philosophers, stolen and written down by Hebrew scribes just two or three centuries before the birth of Christ. However, all scriptural evidence points to their being the words of Solomon, recorded during the period of Solomon's lifetime, about 1,000 BC. All secular ethical writers lived long after the time of Solomon; in his time, the Greek civilization had not yet occurred, and the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle would not be born for another 600 years. It is more likely, in fact, that the ancient Greeks would have borrowed from Solomon.

b. The writings of an ancient Egyptian, Amenemope, closely resemble portions of Proverbs 22-25. Humanistic scholars, of course, consider this to be evidence that the "unknown" writers of Proverbs got their ideas from him, and not from God. This is a predictable assumption, based upon their basic presupposition that the Bible is not inspired. However, this is comparable to seeing a drinking glass half-full or half-empty, depending on one's mindset and presuppositions. In addition, no one knows when this Egyptian lived and wrote; secular scholars date him anywhere from 1,000 BC (Solomon's time) to 600 BC, 400 years later. This makes the humanists' conclusions, at best, inconclusive speculation.

B. Place and Date. The proverbs were spoken by Solomon, most likely in Jerusalem during the early and middle parts of his life (he went completely sour toward the end of his life). Traditional scholars date these teachings at about 1,000 BC. The statement in 25:1, that Chapters 25-29 were added by King Hezekiah, date the final compilation of the book at about 700 BC.

C. Theme. The theme of Proverbs, from beginning to end, is wisdom, its value, and its application to every aspect of life.

D. Highlights. Highlights of Proverbs (actually, it is a book of highlights) include the following:

1. How to Live Wisely. Chapter one speaks of the need to live wisely, and thus avoid trouble, particularly for young men. In this opening chapter is the key to all knowledge: reverential fear of the LORD. In the rejection of that key, the law of sowing and reaping is also expressed here, 1,000 years

before it was set forth by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatian church. (1:7, 24-33)

2. The Key to Wise Choices. We make many decisions and choices in life, some that affect us (and others) in profound ways. The key to making right choices, and to possessing the happiness and success that those choices bring, is to be led by the LORD in making those choices. This vital lesson in life is found in two verses of Chapter 3. Also found in the same chapter is the vital principle of chastisement, the loving correction the Lord sometimes applies to nations, churches and his individual children; and this principle is applied to human parents, whose children, without loving correction and chastisement will self-destruct⁶. (3:5-6, 11-12)

NOTE: Leonora Wood was the godly mother of prominent Christian writer, Catherine Marshall, and a dear friend of mine. She was the real-life "Christy" of Catherine's classic Christian novel. When she was 92, and still teaching a weekly Bible study, I asked her what was the single most important lesson that she had learned in life, for she had lived for the Lord all her long life. She closed her eyes, leaned her head back and was silent for a few moments; then, without opening her eyes or moving, she quoted verses 5 and 6 verbatim. About a year later, I asked her the same question; again, without remembering that I had asked the same question before, she closed her eyes and leaned back as before, and quoted the same two verses. This, I believe, is worth remembering.

3. David's Advice to Solomon. Chapters 2 through 7 appear to be fatherly advice that David had given to Solomon, and that Solomon is then passing on to us. Traced to its divine source then, it is the advice of our Heavenly Father to his children, and the heart of this advice is summarized in three verses of Chapter 4. In this passage I believe "my words" may validly be read as not only a father's advice to his son, but as the Scriptures, the words of God. The key is to keep these words before our eyes and in our hearts (see in this regard Ps 119:11). (4:20-22)

4. Protecting the Heart. Man looks on the outward appearance; but God, who knows what really matters, looks upon the heart. What really defines us is not our outward appearance, but what we think, what we value, what we allow into our hearts, our innermost

⁶ Hebrews 12:5-6

beings. Here in one verse (verse 23) is the vital, fundamental, revelation, that from this wellspring of our hearts flows behavior, ultimately determining what we do. Therefore, we are told, we must be very diligent to keep wrong things from finding a home there to corrupt us. The following verses, that conclude the chapter, are advice for thus guarding our hearts (see also Psalm 101:3 and Proverbs 27:20). Today pornography is wreaking havoc in our culture, destroying countless lives and relationships, including those of Christians. We would all do well to heed the message of the children's song, "Be careful little eyes what you see; be careful little ears what you hear...⁷." (4:23-27)

5. Things the LORD Hates Most. In Chapter 6 there is a listing of things abominable to the LORD, and it would be wise for us to consider such a distilled summary of what most offends Him. Remembering that we have just been warned in Chapter 4 to protect our hearts with all diligence from wicked thoughts and affections, it is interesting that "a heart that deviseth wicked imaginations" makes the list, in the same category as the shedding of innocent blood. This summary should probably be framed and hung on the wall, or prominently displayed on the refrigerator. (6:16-19)

6. "All They That Hate Me Love Death." In Chapters 8 and 9 Wisdom speaks directly to us. In Chapter 8 she speaks of having been present with YHWH before the creation of the Universe. This is divine wisdom, inseparable from the Godhead; thus, it seems, this wisdom who speaks is God Himself⁸.

Passionate sinners, such as militant homosexuals and pro-abortion activists, don't seem satisfied with simply sinning and ignoring God; no, the thought of Him and His laws can inflame them to fury. They become not just sinful rejecters of God--they become haters of God. Whereas the way of obedience leads to life, the way of sinful rebellion leads to death; this fundamental fact is found throughout the Bible. It also seems true that those

⁷ I John 2:16.

⁸ Matthew Henry, the great 17th Century commentator, equates wisdom here in Chapters 8 & 9 with Christ, which is, of course, the same as equating it with all the triune Godhead.

who really hate God seem also to love death: the death of unborn babies and live births who are defective or simply unwanted; death of the elderly, disabled, mentally handicapped or in other ways inconvenient; and the death of those who love life, or disagree with them. Death becomes the means of choice in removing those deemed undesirable, unproductive, inconvenient, or a threat. Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Chairman Mao are extreme examples of this. Yes, "all those that hate [God] love death." This fascinating, fundamental fact of life, one that is so important to understand, is expressed here in only half a verse. (8:36b)

7. "A Jewel of Gold in a Swine's Snout". One aspect of poetry is that, in the best of it, so much can be expressed in so few words. Such is the case with one small verse (verse 22) in Chapter 11. Its 18 simple words are the distilled essence of something so fundamental to a God-ordered life, so resonating with concentrated truth that pages could be written about it without wasting a word. The power of this metaphorical statement is so great (at least to me) that I have pondered it for more than 30 years and it still stops me in my mental tracks. It speaks of the value and beauty of a virtuous, godly woman, something to be appreciated--even revered--and protected. And it expresses the awful, irrational, wrongness of such a woman who would willingly sell all that for a mess of pottage, to become coarse and debased by her choices in life. I am still at a loss for words to express adequately this thought. (11:22)

8. The Way That Seems So Right. Doing "what comes naturally" is often a deadly mistake. Living life according to secular, humanistic values is always a mistake. And yet, this way of living can seem so right. Debbie Boone wrote a beautiful song, "You Light Up My Life"; it was a song about how those who love one another support and sustain each other. But she was criticized by many Christians for one line in the song: "It can't be wrong, when it feels so right." The basis for the criticism lay in the fact that sometimes very wrong things can feel so very right. This principle is eloquently expressed in one verse, and is repeated two chapters later for emphasis⁹. So, how do we summarize the lesson? Live according to what God has said is right--not what seems right to us. (14:12)

***NOTE:** Feeling right or feeling wrong, about actions or decisions, is not necessarily an unscriptural concept. There is reason to believe that, when we are in the will of God, we will have the peace of God. Of course, if we persist in sin, our consciences can become seared so that our spiritual ears*

⁹ Proverbs 16:25.

are deafened to the voice of God. However, when we are seeking to live in his will, asking Him for guidance, it seems that having peace, or not having peace, about a certain choice can be a valid guide. Philippians 4:6-7 tells us that, when we are seeking to live this way, the peace of God will “keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” The Greek word rendered “keep” is “phroureo,” meaning to scout ahead, or set a guard to watch over our hearts and keep us safe. Colossians 3:15 tells us that we should let the peace of God rule in our hearts; and here the Greek word rendered “rule” is “brabeuo,” meaning to govern or act as an umpire, keeping us within the bounds of what is right. From these and other passages of Scripture it seems valid to believe that when we are in the will of God we will have the peace of God; and, conversely, when we are outside the bounds of the will of God we will not have his peace.

9. The Deadliness of Pride. One of the consistent lessons in the Bible is the deadliness of pride; in fact, it seems to have been the original sin, when Lucifer, lifted up with his own beauty and importance, decided to rebel and make himself God in a cosmic coup d' etat which, of course, didn't work (see Isaiah 14:12-15). Warnings against pride are to be found from Leviticus to I John; but the one probably best known, and the one most often misquoted, is in Chapt 16. People commonly recite the verse as "Pride goeth before a fall"; but that is only half the verse, and anyway that's not what it says--it's worse than that. The verse reads, "Pride goeth before **destruction**, and an haughty spirit before a fall." I think that you will agree that destruction is a much more serious consequence than a fall. (16:18)

10. The Beginning of Strife. Another lesson found throughout the Bible is the destructive nature of strife. We are even warned that where there is ongoing strife there is confusion, and no limit to the evil deeds that will follow (Jas 3:16). We are also taught that the best way to handle strife is to head it off before it begins (Prov 15:1). Here in Proverbs there is a unique warning about strife: that, once begun, it is difficult to stop. In an example of the earthy vividness sometimes found in the Bible, strife is compared with urination, an illustration with which we can all identify: that once it has begun, it is difficult to stop. (17:14)

11. True Friendship. It is the nature of proverbs to express a great deal of truth in very few words; this is richly found in Chapter 17, but seldom is there to be found a better example than in the 13 simple words of verse 17. Here we are taught that a true friend, like a true spouse, will stand by his commitment, "for better or for worse." Here also, by clear implication, is

the sober statement that there will be difficult times in the lives of God's children. One doesn't have to live very long to know that many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord (eventually) delivers us out of them all. A true friend walks through those dark valleys with us. (17:17)

12. Riches in Proverbs 18. One of the richest chapters in the Bible is Proverbs 18; the following are examples of its riches:

a. The Awful Power of Words. Chapter 18 is rich with warnings about the power of words--the power to do good, and the power to be destructive. Here we are taught that words can get us into unnecessary trouble; we are also warned that words have the power to injure--down deep inside us, and that they even have power to kill. These warnings about being judicious about our speech are found elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs, but never so richly as in Chapter 18. (18:4, 6-8, 13, 21)

b. A Wounded Spirit, Who Can Bear? One of the basic facts of life emphasized in Psalms and Proverbs is the reality of emotional injury, along with the wonderful fact that God "healeth the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds¹⁰." Here in Chapter 18 is revealed the fact that if we are intact and strong emotionally and spiritually, we can better survive physical injury and sickness. On the other hand, however, we see here that when we are wounded emotionally, a healthy, strong and intact body does not protect us, or soften the emotional blow. Verse 14 tells us that if our attitudes are right, if our relationships with the Lord and with others are good, if we are healthy inside, we can handle physical sickness, injury and disability and go on with life. But then it goes on to ask a powerful rhetorical question: "but a wounded spirit, who can bear?" The answer is, without the Lord, an emphatic "Nobody!" A broken leg, if properly aligned and protected, begins to heal the moment that it is injured; but a broken heart, if not healed, will get progressively worse, and can be fatal--can cause us literally to give up and die. This is a vital lesson in life. (18:14)

c. How to Have a Friend. Everyone needs friends, and in the final verse of Chapter 18 there is a fundamental lesson in life. It takes time to develop mutual trust and confidence, and true, lasting friendship is a rather complex phenomenon; but at the base of it there is a simple rule: If I am to have a friend, I must be a friend. (18:24)

13. The Dangers in Alcohol. Wine is found throughout the Bible, beginning in Genesis 9 with Noah's vineyard and Ham's transgression, and continuing through the ministry of Jesus, the early Church, and the Book of

¹⁰ Psalm 147:3.

Revelation. Having plenty of "corn and wine" is a metaphor throughout the Old Testament for prosperity; likewise, plenty of "oil and wine." Under the Law, tithes of a year's vintage of wine were presented; and they were sacred, to be drunk "before the LORD thy God"¹¹. Throughout the Bible, wine is a blessing, but one that comes with warnings, explicit and implicit, not to overdo it; and the first verse of Proverbs 20 is the one most often quoted.

(20:1)

14. Horse Traders Don't Change. In the phenomenon of bargaining over a price or a trade, the fundamentals are ancient. Whether horse traders, pocket knife swappers on the courthouse lawn, used car shoppers, street vendors in developing countries, house-buyers, or multi-billion dollar corporate takeovers, the principle is the same. The buyer criticizes the object in question as something hardly worth his consideration, pointing out all its faults, until he has purchased it and the deal is closed. Then his opinion of the object is transformed: it is suddenly wonderful in all its ways, and he may boast about the treasure he has just obtained and the steal he made in buying it. This isn't new--Solomon expressed it in one verse.

(20:14)

15. Not the Mind, but the Heart. One of the things of which I am certain is that God will not override my will (or yours). This will be explained in the study guide the New Testament, but suffice it to say here that the Scriptures are emphatic (Old Testament and New Testament) in stating that He does not want anyone to die lost (e.g. Ezekiel 18; II Peter 3:9); and yet Jesus said clearly that most will die lost (Matthew 7:14). If God would force us to do anything, He would force us to be redeemed--but He won't. So, is there any point in praying for those whose minds are made up to do wrong things? Yes! But not because God will force them into a decision to do right; rather, what He will do is to "mess with their hearts"--that is, to woo them in right directions, although the final decisions are left always to them. Even kings are subject to this, and examples are numerous, from Abimelech to Pontius Pilate and his wife; and here, in the first verse of Chapter 21, the principle is expressed. (21:1)

16. Train Up a Child In the Way that He Should Go. The Bible commands parents to rear their children in righteousness (Deuteronomy 6:1-7), to "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). This means to nurture them--to feed them with healthy food, both physical and spiritual, and it means to correct them when they need it. This is a

¹¹ Deuteronomy 14:23.

responsibility shared by the father and mother, but the weight of it is laid primarily on the father. And with this injunction comes a promise: if we do our best to teach and train a child in truth, "when he is old he will not depart from it." Is it a guarantee, then, that our children will never reject the truth and turn away from the Lord? No--it definitely isn't, for here again is the factor of the will. But it does mean that the truth in which we rear our children will not leave them, and the probabilities by the end of their lives are definitely on the side of righteousness and redemption. (22:6)

17. Foolishness Is Bound in the Heart of a Child. Children are by nature unwise; how can they be anything else? Thus, an essential part of training up a child is chastening--correcting him when he misbehaves. This principle is found throughout the Bible, from Leviticus to Revelation, often comparing a father's correcting his child, with God's correcting of His children (as well as churches and nations). And, at the heart of chastening, is love. The principle is that chastening to correct behavior is an act of love: whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth. Why? It is because sin and error destroy the sinner and the one who makes destructive choices¹². To allow a child to grow up with no correction, doing whatever he desires to do, is virtually to guarantee his ultimate destruction (and, probably, the injury and destruction of others). But if we love him, we will correct him and train him up to make wise, healthy, godly choices, and thus be spared a multitude of destructive (and self-destructive) errors. The tendency to do unwise and wrong things is built into the nature of a child; and the remedy is the rod of correction. This "rod" can take many forms, including withholding of privileges; but the basic one seems to be a literal rod, such as a dowel rod or a suitable switch, applied to the buttocks so as to sting, but never to injure. There is no scriptural basis for striking a child in the face, or anywhere else, other than the buttocks, which seems to have been ideally designed for this purpose.

Today, children are exposed to so much evil, that all that parents have to do, to virtually guarantee their destruction, is **nothing**. See also 29:15-17. (22:15)

18. A Famous Verse That is **Not** in the Bible. There are several "verses" which are not in the Bible, but which are quoted as Scripture by those unfamiliar with the Bible and think that they are. An example is, "God helps those who help themselves"; this one is actually from Benjamin Franklin in "Poor Richard's Almanac." But there is one verse that is **not** in

¹² This principle is best summarized in Hebr 12:5-11.

the Bible, yet is frequently and confidently quoted by multitudes who think that it is. It almost always goes like this: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." In one way, this is probably a valid, scriptural concept, for what we dwell on in our thoughts, what we allow to find a place in our thinking and values, will eventually affect our behavior. Violent movies and video games, the hate-vulgarity-violence-filled "rap" in radio and recordings, and the poison of pornography, immediately come to mind. But that is **not** what the verse says; it is speaking of an insincere man, flattering and deceiving in order to manipulate another. Speaking of this wicked man who says one thing but is actually thinking of another, the verse says, "As **he** thinketh in his heart, so is he...." Reading this verse carefully, in the context, will make this crystal clear. (23:6-8)

19. The Irrational Life of a Drunk. Chapter 23 contains the Bible's most vivid (and ugly) description of the life of a habitual drunk. The predictable results of continuous over-indulgence included in the passage are woe, sorrows, contention, babbling, wounds, redness of eyes, loss of sexual inhibitions, the speaking of things one would never say when sober, nauseous dizziness and sickness, and waking with injuries and wondering how they happened. And, finally, there is the irrational pattern of repetition ("I will seek it yet again.")¹³. (23:29-35)

*NOTE: This passage should be compared with Ephesians 5:18, "Be not drunk with wine, **wherein is excess**...." Most modern versions mistranslate this as "Don't be drunk with too much wine..."; but they miss an extremely important point: that in being drunk there is a loss of inhibition and restraint, **resulting in excess**--excess talking, excess loudness, excess anger and violence, and excessive, bad behavior in general. The word "excess" refers to the resulting behavior, not the amount consumed.*

20. Slothfulness Brings Poverty, and Diligence Brings Prosperity. A recurring theme in Proverbs is the importance of diligence, responsibility, and self-discipline in caring for the things we have. Slothfulness and neglect of duties are consistently condemned, and their results are predictable; for fences don't maintain themselves, crops don't tend themselves, grape vines don't prune themselves, and weeds don't remove themselves. This lesson is forcefully expressed in the closing verses of both Chapter 24 and Chapter 27. (24:30-34; 27:23-27)

¹³ When I think of the irrational pattern of repetitive, always destructive, drunkenness, I often think of an old man in Kentucky who had spent a lifetime as a farm hand, never rising above it, spending his meager, weekly pay on whiskey. He could be seen every Saturday evening, walking to town. When asked where he was going, he would usually reply, "I'm going to town to get drunk--and, 'Gawd,' how I dread it."

***NOTE:** According to 25:1, chapters 25 through 29 were added to the Book of Proverbs by King Hezekiah, from the many proverbs of Solomon then existing (remember that 3,000 such proverbs were uttered by Solomon, and recorded, in his lifetime). This tradition is supported by the content of these five chapters, for they are richer in often-quoted verses than any other five chapters in the book, and the poetic imagery is exceptionally vivid. Since Hezekiah and his scribes had at least 2,000 proverbs from which to select the very best, it should not be surprising that those they chose are so rich.*

20. Killing with Kindness. To do good to those who hate us, persecute us, and spitefully use us, is a completely irrational concept, except in the mind of God. In fact, it sounds like a radical New Testament concept--not something from the Old Testament. And yet when Jesus spoke it in the Sermon on the Mount, and when Paul wrote it in his letter to the Church at Rome, they were paraphrasing a passage in Proverbs 25¹⁴. In fact, in Paul's case, he was quoting it--almost verbatim. (25:21-22)

21. Give Me Time to Wake Up, Please. No one enjoys a rude awakening, and some of us need more time than others to wake from sleep. An excellent example of the earthy, true-to-life practicality of Proverbs is one verse that makes this clear. Its message is, "Please be more sensitive to how I feel; give me a little time to wake up before speaking to me in a loud voice, as if I were already wide awake." (27:14)

22. The Fear of Man Bringeth a Snare. Here is a vital lesson in life: man-pleasing doesn't work. In fact, if we live that way, it can have the opposite effect--it can make others care even less for us, for in so living we earn their disrespect and scorn. But it can be worse than that. If we go through life trying to please others so they will like us, accept or love us, it becomes a trap--a self-compounding error from which it is difficult to escape. On the other hand, the good news is that if we put our trust in the Lord and set pleasing Him as our goal, we will live free of that endless pressure of trying to please man, and the perpetual disappointment that is the usual result. (29:25)

23. The Virtuous Woman. The final chapter of the Book of Proverbs identifies itself as the words of King Lemuel, recording things taught to him by his mother. Since we are told in the Talmud (the cumulative Jewish commentary on the Old Testament) that one of the five (or six) names by which Solomon was known was Lemuel, it is pretty safe to attribute the

¹⁴ Matthew 5:43-48; Rom 12:19-21.

chapter to him¹⁵. It is made even more interesting to think that Bathsheba taught him these things, when we reflect on her life. The first 9 verses are cautionary statements, reminding him of common pitfalls to avoid as king, and of his responsibility to care for and protect the poor and needy. Then, abruptly, the subject turns to a description of the godly, virtuous, woman and her value, and the rest of this final chapter is devoted to her. Perhaps she was trying to tell him that one good woman is more to be desired than the 1,000 nameless, pagan, floozies that he eventually chose. (Chapter 31)

NOTE: *The final 22 verses of the final chapter, the passage on the virtuous woman, are an acrostic. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each of the 22 final verses begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in perfect order, from Aleph to Tau. What does this mean? I don't know; but at the very least, it may be God's way of calling our attention to the fact that this closing passage in His book of wisdom is extremely important. There are other acrostic passages in the Old Testament, in Psalms and Lamentations, most notably Ps 119 (q.v.).*

¹⁵ As noted at the beginning, under "Author," the Talmud lists other names by which Solomon was known. The number is either five or six, depending on whether "Agur" and "the son of Jakeh" refer to one man or two; and this depends on where one places the comma (after "Agur" or after "Jakeh").