

Prayers

Opening prayer

You have broken into my life, Lord Jesus, with the authority of one who knows what is right for me, and how I can best be fulfilled. You were with me when I was conceived, when I was born, when I grew up, and throughout all the major events of my life, and You know all manner of things about my future that I can never know. Bless me now, I pray, and give me courage to rest in the knowledge that whatever happens to me, You are indeed in control and You will keep me secure, 'till the end. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: BUILDING

1. For yourself

Find a new time to pray today, make the effort to do this and discover that as a consequence, your feelings and attitudes can change for better or worse. Press through your feelings to say prayers of blessing for yourself; ask the Lord to bless you, not for any reason except that you are 'you'.

2. For your friends and family

Ask the Lord to bless your friends and family, again, not for any reason, but because they are who they are, and they are precious to you and the Lord of all

3. For the church and its work

Ask the Lord to bless both your church, in your neighbourhood, and also the church within your country, again, not for any reason, except that it is His church and He loves it

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for the government of your country, locally and nationally, and ask the Lord to bless the work it does to provide a secure environment for life, growth and wealth.

Meditation

When you are hard pressed by adversity,
Look to the hills, and see Your Lord
Coming from the horizons of eternity
To help and save and bless and heal

When you are stuck in the quagmires of life
Look to the Word, and discover within
The liberating work of Almighty God
Who works for good throughout the ages

When you are worried by the mystery of relationships
Look to the Cross, and be humbled
By the love which passes understanding
And breaks down all human barriers

When you are disturbed by sins of the Church
Look to the Spirit of Christ within you
For His presence will guide His people
To repent, and pursue all righteousness

Then, when Satan's wiles have danced awhile
Look to the path of faith you have trod
And know that for sure, for now, forever
And in Christ, you are eternally secure

Bible Study

Bible passage – Proverbs 1:8-19

⁸ Pay attention, my son, to your father's moral discipline, and do not reject your mother's instruction; ⁹ for they will be like a wreath of honour for your head, and pendants around your neck.

¹⁰ My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. ¹¹ If they say,

'Come with us, let us set a trap for the unsuspecting and innocent, and attack them; ¹² let's come on them like death and take them whilst alive and whole, and then give them hell. ¹³ We will then get hold of all kinds of valuables and fill our houses with the loot. ¹⁴ Throw in your lot with us, we will share all our money together.'

¹⁵ then, do not follow in their way, my son, keep well away from their paths; ¹⁶ for their feet run to evil, and they hurry to shed blood.

¹⁷ How useless it is to bait a trap while a bird is watching! ¹⁸ But these men lie in wait to slaughter themselves, having set a trap for their own lives!

¹⁹ This is the end result for all who become wealthy through violence. It destroys the soul of those who do it.

Review

Proverbs offers young people straight advice; joining those who roam in gangs to rob others for personal gain is a pathway to evil and suffering. The first lesson in being good is to avoid evil.

After the introduction to the book of Proverbs, these verses form a concise piece of advice typical of the 'wisdom' teaching found throughout the Bible. The whole passage reads rather like a parable, but it is also relatively easy to imagine how it might have been used in the social setting of ancient Israel. Here is advice for young men, and possibly young women as well, about keeping on what we might all the 'straight and narrow' pathway of good moral living. Overall, it does not tell us much about God or about what is good, but it urges restraint and wilful resistance to evil, especially the evil that is the subject of the tenth Commandment, that is, 'covetousness' or 'wanting what is not possessed'. As such this passage remains a powerful piece of Biblical instruction or 'wisdom' for today.

Before we study the passage itself, it is worth looking further at the way Proverbs is presented in most Bible translations. You will probably see that your own Bible presents these verses as if they are Hebrew poetry, just like the Psalms, set out in lines that balance in Hebrew but not in English! However, I have not used this convention, I have written the passage out like prose. The reason why I have done this is because the whole passage reads better when presented as prose in English. Moreover, I am not convinced that it is right to always present Hebrew poetic phrasing as if it is English poetry. It is a complicated subject, but there can be a much thinner dividing line between poetry and prose in Hebrew than there is in English; it is all about the stresses of the spoken language and general manners of speech.

Now to our passage. Clearly, it is addressed to a son, or a child, for whom this is instruction to be learned, and it certainly reflects the fifth commandment; 'honour your father and mother ...' (Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16). As a whole, the teaching is not in the form of lists of commands to be learned, it is moral instruction, pointing the child in the right direction to understand right and wrong and encouraging mature decisions. One interesting feature of the first verse is that it mentions not just the contribution of the father to this moral order. The child must accept his discipline, and must also accept the 'instructions' of the mother (1:8)!

Verse 9 sounds to us like a mere illustrative addition to this call for wisdom and learning, but it is in fact far more. It is not easy to follow because its Hebrew uses words and refers to social practices that are not common today, speaking of 'wreaths' and 'pendants'. What does this mean? In ancient times, it was normal for a child who was good and obedient to be rewarded by items of clothing and dress, as an observable sign of 'favour' (1:9). There is one very obvious example of this in the Bible, for the story of Joseph (Gen 37:1-4) tells us that Jacob's 'favour' was bestowed on Joseph in the form of a famous 'many-coloured' coat!

The parable now takes a different direction as it describes the activities of young people who have not been led in the pathway of righteousness. Their words, deeds and motives are presented in verses 11-14, and most of us can recognise in them the characteristics of disaffected youth. Here, they pool their resources and use their local knowledge to set ambushes for passing tradesmen and camel trains carrying goods through their territory. Such attacks were a well documented part of life in Israel, for the country contained highly important trade routes connecting the rich Empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia. 'Highway robbery' was an easy path for some to get rich very quickly, but it carried with it great dangers; such bands were brutally protective of their possessions and status and those who were disaffected usually did not live to tell others (1:12). Proverbs is quick to warn all children away from such temptations of wealth which are stained with blood.

Verses 17 and 18 repeat the warning about those who live in this way, using the language typical of proverbs. Unfortunately, however, most people today will not quickly 'get the picture' of what is said here. Proverbs is firstly describing how ridiculous it would be to set a trap for a bird while it is watching (1:17), because of course, the bird will fly away at the sight. In contrast, verse 18 says that those people of Israel who follow evil ways plainly set a trap for themselves from which they cannot escape; they do not have the intelligence of a bird to fly away from evil! The proverb concludes; '*This is the end result for all who become wealthy through violence. It destroys the soul of those who do it*'. We can understand the point, even if it all sounds a little odd to us now. It clearly meant far more to those for whom it was first written.

So the book of Proverbs starts with a word of warning against evil ways; but it is only a starting place for what follows. It is worth trying to work out what activities today compare with the evil bands of men committing 'highway robbery' in ancient times, who pose a similar threat to the moral and religious fabric of society today. Young people need to be warned against them now just as they did back then. The importance of morality and the presence of God in His Creation will be subjects we return to many times over in the rest of the book.

Discipleship

Questions for groups

1. Discuss what social circumstances might be equivalent to that described in this passage.
2. Does ill-gotten gain always destroy those who obtain it? Why does it seem that some people gain at other people's expense; is this fair?
3. Do you think it is right to reward good moral behaviour through visible means?

Discipleship challenges

- *Read through a newspaper of current affairs article online. What are the serious moral issues in the world today? Banking? War? Pollution? How can Christian people make a serious difference to how these things are dealt with today?*
- *Pray for wisdom. Pray that wisdom will become the touchstone of good moral leadership within the church today. Pray that just as evangelism is seen to be important, so it will be seen to be important to help those who come to faith to know what Christian morality is and what God is saying about the important moral issues of our day.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, in those difficult times when life feels numb and love seems far away, come gently, we pray. Bring a word, a touch, a sense of Your presence; and place within us the seeds of hope and renewal. Then, with every day that passes, may we increasingly know Your graciousness and care and rejoice in the transforming power of Your love. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN