

## Does Proverbs Promise Too Much?

Proverbs 3:1-2

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, <sup>2</sup> for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.

As we have seen, Proverbs 1-9 is a series of lectures or admonitions that the inspired sage is giving his son. His objective is to influence his son to a life of wisdom and righteousness, and one distinctive of his approach, as we've seen, is the "motivational" clause at the beginning of most of his lectures.

- 3:1-2: "My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you."
- 4:10: "Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many."
- 4:20-22: "My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh."

And so on it goes. In fact, the sage sprinkles in similar "motivational clauses" throughout his lectures. He wants his son to know that it is wise to be righteous – it pays off in divine blessing.

At some point in all this the question occurs to you, "Is all that really true?" It's God's Word, so you know it's true. But it doesn't seem always to match up to life. Do the righteous always live long lives? Does God protect his people and keep them from harm? Does he make them prosper? Or ... does Proverbs promise too much?! In fact, we might ask the same about many of the Psalms. (cf. Ps. 91:3-13; 121, etc.).

So just how are we to understand all this? I suspect this is a question that has occurred to every Bible reader at some point or another. And the answer is complex – there are several answers, several layers of answers, actually. And for any specific question it may be that various factors apply.

### Reading Proverbs Correctly

First, we must make sure we are not misreading Proverbs. For one, we must recognize that proverbs are not promises. Nor are they inflexible laws. Proverbs are proverbs – pithy sayings of condensed wisdom. They summarize broad teachings of wisdom applied to specific life-circumstances. They tell the truth, but because of their brevity they can't always tell *all* the truth. Broadly speaking the truths expressed in the various proverbs hold out a happy prospect for those who follow wisdom, as we will consider shortly. But proverbs are not promises or inflexible laws. Only collectively do the proverbs in the book of Proverbs give a more holistic picture.

For example, it is true that if you "train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it" (22:6). That is a true saying, virtually indisputable. It's also true that many wise fathers have had foolish sons. They trained their sons in the way they should go, but their wisdom was rejected. Proverbs recognizes this also: "A wise son hears his father's

instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke” (13:1; cf. 15:20; 17:25). Proverbs 22:6 is still true – it states with broad brush how life works – but it’s not the whole picture.

Or again, it is true that the diligent and those with a good work ethic get ahead. Proverbs 10:4: “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich” (cf. 12:11, 14, 24; 14:23). It’s also true that some who have been diligent have experienced injustice (13:23) or hard providence and have a difficult time getting by financially. But it remains true in broad terms that it’s the diligent and industrious who get ahead.

And in fact this same book of Proverbs that anticipates temporal blessing to the righteous also speaks of the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering. “The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice” (13:23). Even in Proverbs itself it is not always the case that the righteous get ahead (cf. 10:2; 13:23; 23:17; 24:16; 28:15-16a; also 15:16; 16:8, etc.). Sometimes they even die young (14:32). So in deciding this question of whether Proverbs promises too much we must look at Proverbs “whole” lest we misunderstand what it actually has to say.

Nor does God intend for us to read this book of Proverbs in isolation from the rest of the biblical canon. We ought to read Proverbs keeping in mind, for example, that the books of Job and Ecclesiastes wrestle at length with the question of injustice and the suffering of the righteous. And we should read Proverbs with the New Testament in mind also. We will see more of all this as we go along, but note for now that Proverbs is not the only book in our Bible – it is meant to be informed by the entire canon.

I suspect that an additional theological factor in all this is the reality that even “the righteous” are sinful and can never claim that they deserve only blessing in this life. And the fact of the matter is that God remains sovereign in every case. Job’s friends were not right – calamity is not necessarily evidence of God’s displeasure. God has purposed our good, and he blesses the righteous, and he judges the wicked. The proverbs apply these great truths to specific circumstances. But God’s blessing and judging are not meted out with the same timing in every case. The wicked may well get by with their wickedness for a time, as Proverbs recognizes. And God may have purposes and goals to accomplish in us or through us that entail a sad providence.

And more broadly we must assume that Solomon and the other inspired sages knew about righteous Joseph who suffered long years. They knew of Job also who suffered precisely because he was faithful. Certainly Solomon knew of faithful Elimelech and his sons who died young, and of Naomi who suffered so long and was “made bitter.” And he knew of Uriah the faithful soldier whose life was cut short by David. And we can think more broadly still of Jeremiah and other prophets who were scorned and suffered abuse. Indeed, there is Jesus, the very model of righteousness, whose life was cut off while young – his path was certainly not “made smooth”!

All this to say that although various proverbs do hold out a happy prospect and in that broad sense “promise” blessing for obedience, Proverbs itself acknowledges that this “promise” is not to be understood in absolute terms. Proverbs are not *promises* and should not be taken as promises. Proverbs are proverbs – pithy sayings that condense a broad truth into a brief expression. They tell the truth, but because of their brevity they can’t say everything.

Collectively the proverbs in the book of Proverbs give a more holistic picture, and particularly so in light of the rest of the biblical canon.

### **Covenant Context**

We should also consider the Proverbs in their covenantal context and the character of the old covenant itself. The old covenant itself was marked by just this kind of promise for obedience. Take Exodus 19, for example. When God met with Israel at Sinai and entered into covenant relationship with them, here's what he said: "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine" (Exod. 19:5). That was the character of the old covenant.

Leviticus 26 also famously promises Israel blessing for obedience. Notices verses 3-12.

If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.... I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you. You shall eat old store long kept, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new.

Now the following verses promise curse for disobedience – if they disobey, all these promises will be reversed. And that, of course, is the history of Old Testament Israel – when they were obedient, God blessed them, and they prospered in every conceivable way. And when they were disobedient, they were judged. Obedience brought temporal blessing. Disobedience eventually brought exile. These were the terms of the covenant.

This covenantal arrangement is echoed throughout the Torah and throughout the Old Testament. The Prophets base their messages on this – "Turn back to God and be blessed; if you turn away you will be judged."

This is echoed in the famous promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

This is not a promise given to America, as it has often been claimed. This is a promise to Israel, an echo of the covenant promise itself – obedience would bring temporal blessing. Now I have a suspicion that if America were to humble itself and pray and repent God just may well respond with temporal blessing. But we are not given any such promise. America is not God's old covenant people Israel.

You can see, then, that the happy prospect of Proverbs is in the first instance a general echo of God's promise to his old covenant people, only here on the individual level.

In fact Proverbs 3:3 uses the standard covenant language: “Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.” “Steadfast love and faithfulness” (*hesed* and *emet*) are standard terms used regularly of God’s covenant relationship to Israel – the relationship is grounded in his *hesed* and continues because of his *emet*. Here these virtues are represented as our corresponding responsibility: “Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.” The connotation here is that of covenant responsibilities.

In fact, this paragraph (Proverbs 3:1-12) is structured to reflect this “If you obey, I will bless” covenantal arrangement. Note that the odd numbered verses state the human obligation in the covenant, and the even numbered verses state the covenanted divine response (Waltke).

- Verse 1, the human obligation: “My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments.”
- Verse 2, the divine response: “for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.”
- Verse 3, the human obligation: “Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.”
- Verse 4, the divine response: “So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.”
- Verse 5, the human obligation: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.
- Verse 6, the divine response: “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”
- Verse 7, the human obligation: “Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.”
- Verse 8, the divine response: “It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”
- Verse 9, the human obligation: “Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce;”
- Verse 10, the divine response: “then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”
- Verse 11, the human obligation: “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof.”
- Verse 12, the divine response: “for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights” – that is to say, the Lord loves you.

So, again, in answering the question, “Does Proverbs Promise too much?” we must recognize this broader background of God’s promise to Israel: obedience brought blessing, even temporal blessing. But note that believers today are not ancient Israelites. The old covenant was brought to an end (2Cor. 3:11), and we today do not live under its terms. In Christ we have a “new covenant” that has better promises and better provisions. We should not expect that old covenant promises made to old covenant people all apply to us in the exact same way. I’ll come back to this momentarily.

## **A Longer Perspective**

Finally, we must recognize that Proverbs' own view of the consequences of wisdom and folly is not just short term – it looks ahead to how things finally turn out. The moral order built into the world by the Creator has been blurred by sin, and Proverbs recognizes that, as we have seen. But it also looks ahead to a restoration of the created order. For example, Proverbs 10:25 takes this longer perspective: “When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever.” The view is long term. Proverbs 14:19 seems to take a long view of things also: “The evil bow down before the good, the wicked at the gates of the righteous” – we don't see a lot of that yet today! The perspective is long term.

Similarly, Proverbs 15:25: “The LORD tears down the house of the proud but maintains the widow's boundaries.” Of course there are arrogant people with beautiful houses, and many widows have been swindled. The point of this proverb

is not to declare a truth that always stands in the present but rather to assert a more ultimate principle: “God opposes the proud and cares for the needy, and he will eventually make all things right” (Jason DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*, p.88).

The perspective is broader than the immediate.

Proverbs 24:16 seems to have this long perspective also: “the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.” Here is a frank acknowledgement that the righteous suffer. In fact, sometimes they fall “seven times” (the number of completion) – that is, they sometimes are completely defeated. Yet in the end “they rise again.” The perspective is long term.

Proverbs 12:28 is more explicit in this vein and makes this intriguing statement: “In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death.” No death for the righteous? Surely Solomon knew that righteous people die too – all of them! So we have to understand his perspective in broader terms. He is not talking about physical death; he's looking to life after death. There is a very important sense in which the righteous never die – they live forever in the blessed presence of God. That's what Proverbs 14:32 has in mind when it says, “The wicked is overthrown through his evil-doing, but the righteous finds refuge in his death” – even in death the righteous finds refuge in God. By contrast, Proverbs 11:7 tells us that there is no hope for the wicked in death. The blessing of God on the righteous is not for this life only but for eternity, and the Proverbs maintain this broad, holistic perspective.

All this is to say that while a given proverb may seem to promise a tit-for-tat arrangement of temporal blessing for obedience, reading Proverbs whole tempers that impression considerably.

### **Proverbs and the New Covenant Believer**

So then how can today's new covenant believer read Proverbs?

On one level, as we all are aware, the old covenant in countless ways anticipates or looks ahead in some way to the new covenant. The Sabbath, the sign of the old covenant, points ahead to our rest in Christ that is realized now and climactically in the age to come. The Temple points ahead to Christ and our enjoyment of the presence of God now by the Spirit and climactically in the age

to come. Israel's "holy nation" status points ahead to the status and experience of the church today and climactically in the age to come. Wisdom itself points ahead to Christ in whom are hid all the treasures of God's wisdom. So also it seems the happy prospect of blessing for obedience in Proverbs looks ahead to the blessedness enjoyed in greater ways by the faithful today in Christ – and then climactically in the age to come.

We don't want to say that the happy prospect of Proverbs is entirely spiritualized – often God in grace does reward his people's faithfulness with temporal blessings. Indeed, most of us are so awash with temporal and material blessings that we take them for granted. Still, what we call "spiritual" blessing remains a large part of the answer. There is blessing in obedience. Jesus says this crisply in John 13:17 – "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

And then there is the longer view. For example, consider Proverbs 2:21: "For the upright will inhabit the land." This explicitly reflects the old covenant in which God promises temporal blessing to the people of Israel – if they are obedient they will be blessed in their land. More broadly it is also a vivid reminder of the truth that righteousness yields a blessed life. Yet this also points us ahead to the larger truth that it is the righteous who in the end "will inherit the earth" (Ps.37:11; Matt. 5:5). Now we have sin, and we cannot achieve righteousness on our own – forgiveness and righteousness and the enablement to live successfully under God all must come to us as gifts of grace in Christ – but it is nonetheless true that it is the righteous, not the disobedient, who in the end will inherit the earth and stand with Christ sharing in his inheritance.

Matthew 19 and Mark 10 record for us the famous incident of Jesus and the "rich young ruler." After the rich man went away unwilling, at Jesus' command, to give up everything he had, the disciples asked our very question: "We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Mt. 19:27). Jesus responded in terms of great expectation:

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life (vv. 28-29).

Mark includes a significant detail that is only implicit in Matthew.

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold *now in this time*, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life (10:28).

There it is. "Now in this time" those who follow Christ receive temporal blessings. These blessings are not necessarily literal "houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands." And in fact there will be "persecutions" also, he says. But there will be genuine, realized blessing nonetheless – "now, in this age." And ultimately there will be blessing unsurpassed at Christ's return when we share in his resurrection glory. At last every promised blessing will be realized in full.

I mentioned earlier (cf. Waltke) that the life of Jesus might seem to falsify Proverbs. The very model of righteousness did not have a "smooth path." But if we look through to the end we see that he does not falsify Proverbs but fulfills its promise in his resurrection-vindication, his

ascension, his kingly reign, and in the coming display of his consummate glory. So also with us, through him.

## **Final Reflections**

I'll wrap this up with a few summary considerations.

1. God remains sovereign in the lives of his people and is never under obligation to give temporal blessing of any kind. He dispenses grace sovereignly and is at all times free with regard to the lives of his creatures.
2. "Proverbs" are brief expressions of condensed wisdom that tell the truth but, because of their brevity, often do not give the whole picture. Individually they express general truth in specific application, but they are nonetheless generalized statements of how life works.
3. Proverbs itself, when read whole, plainly and frankly acknowledges that the righteous may suffer loss and even defeat in this life.
4. Proverbs must be read in light of the entire biblical canon.
5. The proverbs' "blessing for obedience" tone reflects an old covenant agreement that was never intended to apply universally forever.
6. The truth remains that obedience brings blessing – sometimes material and temporal, always spiritual, and ultimately both forever.

As new covenant believers we may and ought to read Proverbs with a great sense of anticipation for the blessing it holds out to its readers. It remains true always that it is wise to be righteous – it pays off both in the short and the long term.

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