

Proverbs 28-29 conclude the Proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah copied (chapters 25-29).

There is an overarching structure to these two chapters –
but we will take two weeks to go through it!

But let me give you the overview first!

1. The relationship to Torah (instruction) as a measure for ruling, in particular that of the rich over the poor (28:2-11)
2. The relationship with God as a measure for ruling and striving for gain (28:13-27)
3. Rearing and ruling that have proved worthwhile in dealing with the poor and humble (29:3-15)
4. Rearing and Relationship with God (29:17-26) [Waltke, 405]

In between these sections are individual proverbs that stitch the whole section together.
There are six proverbs that contrast the fortunes of the wicked and the righteous.

Let me read those proverbs in order:

28:1 – The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.

28:12 – When the righteous triumph, there is great glory,
but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves.

28:28 – When the wicked rise, people hide themselves,
but when they perish, the righteous increase.

29:2 – When the righteous increase, the people rejoice,
but when the wicked rule, the people groan.

29:16 – When the wicked increase, transgression increases,
but the righteous will look on their downfall.

29:27 – An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous,
but one whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked.

This is the order – the pattern – the movement of the whole section.

This leaves four sections – and in the middle, a single verse:

29:1 – “He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck,
will suddenly be broken beyond healing.”

This is the central question for *you*.

Will you be stubborn?

Will you stiffen your neck and refuse to hear?

Or will you listen to the voice of Wisdom –
and heed her call?!

1. The Wicked Flee, but the Righteous Are Bold (v1)

*The wicked flee when no one pursues,
but the righteous are bold as a lion.*

The wicked have a guilty conscience.

They know that they are guilty – they know that someone *should* be chasing them –
so they flee when no one pursues.

I suspect that we have all seen this – and probably even done this!

The righteous, on the other hand are bold as a lion.

Being in the right does not guarantee that you will win –

but it does give you a certain confidence.

For the righteous, there is a boldness that comes from having a clean conscience.

And for the Righteous One – he is himself the Lion of Judah.

And since this section is speaking much of the character of the wise king –
we ought to see our Lord Jesus at the heart of this passage.

a. A Discerning Ruler Will Keep the Law, Seek the LORD, and Maintain Integrity (v2-6)

² *When a land transgresses, it has many rulers,
but with a man of understanding and knowledge,
its stability will long continue.*

Verses 2-6 reflects on how a discerning ruler will keep the Law,
seek the LORD, and maintain integrity.

It starts by pointing out that a land will have the rulers that it deserves.

Have you ever wondered why we never have any good options
in the presidential election?

It's because of *us*.

“We, the people” have a tendency to divide – a tendency to split apart.

And when “we, the people” split apart – we have leaders that split apart.

Think of Israel's history –

the kingdom divided after Solomon's death –

so that his son, Rehoboam, only governed two tribes,
while Jeroboam ruled the ten tribes in the north.

Verse 3 illustrates this:

³ *A poor man who oppresses the poor
is a beating rain that leaves no food.*

The phrase “poor man” speaks of a “poor” *gibbor* –
and *gibbor* means a *strong man* – or a *mighty* man.
The image here is of one poor man who is stronger than another.

And when one poor man oppresses another poor man –
the result is “a beating rain that leaves no food.”

Rain is supposed to *nourish* the land –
so a beating rain that destroys food is the opposite of what rain is supposed to be.
Likewise, a ruler is supposed to nourish and protect his people,
so a destitute *gibbor* who mistreats the poor
ends up bringing ruin upon the land.

So how do you discern?
What does understanding look like?

Verse 4-5 talk about the importance of *law* and *understanding*:

⁴ *Those who forsake the law praise the wicked,
but those who keep the law strive against them.*

⁵ *Evil men do not understand justice,
but those who seek the LORD understand it completely.*

If you would understand justice *seek the LORD*.
If you would strive against the wicked *keep the Law*.

Because those who forsake the law praise the wicked.
You don't have to say anything.
In the act of forsaking the Law you are praising the wicked.
The word translated “law” is *Torah* – the word used to refer to the Five Books of Moses.
It is also used throughout the book of Proverbs – often translated “instruction.”

Because God's law is not just an arbitrary list of rules.
God's law – his *torah* – is the pattern of life
that conforms to the God who made the world!

Do not *forsake* God's law!
Notice that the focus here is on those who *know better*!

If you know God law – if you know what God says about how to live –
then to turn away from instruction – to turn away from that pattern –
is to praise the wicked.

Because you are saying by your actions that the wicked are right!

And by implication, you are suggestion that all wickedness is right!

Because God's law is not just a list of rules!

God's law – his *torah* – his instruction –
reflects himself.

The same God who said that murder is wrong also said that stealing is wrong.

If you think that it's okay to steal a Coke from your boss –
then – by your actions – you are saying that it's okay to ignore God.

In the same way,

⁵ *Evil men do not understand justice,
but those who seek the LORD understand it completely.*

The one who seeks the LORD understands justice *completely*.

We're not talking about abstract knowledge.

It's not saying that the one who seeks the LORD
has a comprehensive knowledge of all legal matters.

Rather, those who seek the LORD will be properly oriented toward justice.

If you are properly oriented toward God,
then you will become properly oriented toward others – toward self –
and toward all creation.

And so our first subsection concludes:

⁶ *Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity
than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.*

This reminds us that we still live in the middle of history.

There are times when things do not go the way they should.

In theory, a person who walks with integrity should not be poor.

In theory, a person who is crooked in his ways should not be rich.

But things are not *yet* the way they should be.

So when things are not the way they should be,

remember that it is better to be a poor man who walks with integrity – wholeness –
than to forsake God's law in pursuit of riches or happiness by crooked paths!

b. A Discerning Son Will Be Generous, Blameless, and Humble (v7-11)

And remember that the path of folly usually starts with something innocuous –
it seems like no big deal!

Notice that verses 7-11 focus not on kings or rulers – but on ordinary sons:

⁷ *The one who keeps the law is a son with understanding,
but a companion of gluttons shames his father.*

Again the theme is *understanding* and God's *law*.

The one who keeps the law – the one who observes *Torah* is a son with understanding.

Why does God command us to be sexually faithful?

Because it is *good for us*:

those who have multiple sexual partners have a lot of trouble!

And since sexual relations have a strong tendency toward having children,
there is a lot of mess that comes from *forsaking* God's law.

Notice the contrast:

“a companion of gluttons shames his father.”

Who you keep company with provides the direction for your life.

If you are hanging out with gluttons – that suggests that this is who you want to be.

Who do you want to be?

What path do you want to walk?

Do you want wisdom?

Do you want to be a person of discernment – with understanding?

Then be a companion of wise and understanding people!

Look around you.

Who do you admire?

Who do you want to be like?

Hang out with them!

Seek to get to know them!

Ask them questions.

The next three verses (8-10) use negative examples to show this:

⁸ *Whoever multiplies his wealth by interest and profit^[a]
gathers it for him who is generous to the poor.*

Multiplying wealth by “interest and profit” refers to those

who seek to advance their own career at the expense of others.

If your business practice involves putting other people out of business,
then you are profiting at the expense of others.

The one who is generous uses his resources to help enrich others.

The picture here is of one who uses his resources to benefit the whole community,
with the result that *everyone* fares well.

⁹ *If one turns away his ear from hearing the law,
even his prayer is an abomination.*

If you will not hear God, then he will not hear you.
If you are living in rebellion against God – refusing to hear and to obey his voice –
then don't be surprised when your prayers are not answered.

The result is found in verse 10:

¹⁰ *Whoever misleads the upright into an evil way
will fall into his own pit,
but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance.*

Because *in the end* the wicked will fall into their own pit.
Sometimes it happens quickly.
He said “we don't need to wear masks” – he falls into his own pit...

There is a sort of poetic justice there.

But there is also a poetic justice for the blameless:
they will have a goodly inheritance.

We see this clearly in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the dead.
In his resurrection – in his ascension to the right hand of God –
he has received the inheritance of the Son of God.
He is the blameless one – he is the Blessed One –
who inherits all the earth from his Father.

And we who have believed in Jesus have received the promised Holy Spirit –
the deposit – the guarantee of our inheritance.

And by the Spirit we have now been united to the life of Jesus –
and thus we commune in the gifts and graces of those who belong to Jesus.

So verses 2-6 have similar patterns in setting up the importance of law and understanding –
and in the same way, verse 11 reminds us of verse 6:

¹¹ *A rich man is wise in his own eyes,
but a poor man who has understanding will find him out.*

The rich man who is wise in his own eyes will be revealed for the fool that he is.
Because the poor man who has understanding will find him out.

Yes, at the end of history, all will be made right.
But for now, in the middle of history, we must settle for those glimpses of justice
that remind us of that day.

And our second contrast between the righteous and the wicked focuses on this:

2. The Triumph of the Righteous (Glory) vs. the Rise of the Wicked (People Hide) (v12)

¹² *When the righteous triumph, there is great glory,
but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves.*

Verse 12 and verse 28 are closely related –
forming a frame around verses 13-27.

This section will talk about various types of wicked people –
so this frame provides for a way of thinking about the rise of the wicked.

Notice how the two verses progress:

v12 When the righteous triumph, there is great glory (think David and Solomon –
or Hezekiah, for that matter),
but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves.

v28 When the wicked rise, people hide themselves;
but when they perish, the righteous increase.

There is a pattern here.

There is a tendency for the wicked to rise up against the righteous –
and when the wicked rise – people hide themselves.

When the wicked rule, it is prudent to lay low and not make a big stink!

But when the wicked perish, the righteous increase.

The basic principle here is that you need to be rightly related to God
in order for all your other relationships to work well.

Being “righteous” is not just a matter of doing the right thing –
it means to be righteous *before God* –
which certainly includes doing the right thing!

But our problem is that we are not all that good at doing the right thing!

That’s why verse 13 starts:

a. Confess Your Sins, Fear the LORD, and Walk in Integrity (v13-18)

¹³ *Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper,
but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.*

Don't hide your sins.
It doesn't work.
Confess your sins – *and forsake them.*

¹⁴ *Blessed is the one who fears the LORD^[b] always,
but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity.*

The opening words of verse 14 are the same as Psalm 1 –
“blessed is the man...”
Blessed is the man who fears always.
The name of Yahweh is not in the text – but it is clearly implied.

Do not harden your heart – as your fathers did in the wilderness –
when they fell into calamity – they fell into evil.

Let your heart be *soft* toward God.
Be quick to hear what he is saying – and quick to put it into practice.

Verses 15-16 then speak of the ruler:

¹⁵ *Like a roaring lion or a charging bear
is a wicked ruler over a poor people.*

This applies the principles of the first half of the chapter to the ruler.
In the same way that an oppressive poor man destroys other poor people,
so also a wicked ruler really makes a mess of a poor people.
And what is more:

¹⁶ *A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor,
but he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days.*

How does a ruler become oppressive?
Because he lacks understanding.
He lacks discernment.
If a person has power – but not wisdom – he will be a cruel oppressor.
Just think back over the various jobs you've had in your life.

Did you ever have a boss who just didn't understand people?
He may have been good at many things –
but when it came to people – he just didn't seem to care?

That is a disaster.

Or maybe he *understood people* – but he used his knowledge for his own ends?

The narcissist has a measure of understanding –

but *true* understanding is not just a matter of *knowing that*.

True understanding includes *knowing how* – and *why*.

True understanding includes understanding how to relate to God in the midst of life!

True understanding starts with repentance – confessing sin and turning away from it.

True understanding fears the LORD and seeks first his kingdom!

Such a one will prolong his days.

In contrast (v17):

¹⁷ *If one is burdened with the blood of another,
he will be a fugitive until death;^[c]
let no one help him.*

Don't rescue the guilty!

Let God's justice work its course!

For,

¹⁸ *Whoever walks in integrity will be delivered,
but he who is crooked in his ways will suddenly fall.*

Again we see the importance of walking straight – talking straight –
avoiding crooked paths – “the twisted one of double-dealing ways.”

Our Lord Jesus walked in integrity.

And he was delivered – he was saved from all his foes –
through his resurrection from the dead.

And so we should live faithfully in his ways –
which is the theme of verse 19-24:

b. Work Hard, Be Faithful, and Don't Show Partiality (v19-24)

¹⁹ *Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread,
but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.*

Hard work is important.

The fourth commandment calls you to work for six days of the week.

In our day, we have a very strange view of work!

In Proverbs, “work” meant things like –

Plow your field.
Plant crops – fight off bears – talk to your neighbors about the weather.
Spend time at the city gate doing business.
Check on your son who is out with the sheep.
Cut some firewood.
Help a neighbor who was repairing his house.

At the end of the day you wouldn't get "paid."
If you had hired a neighbor to help for the day,
you might pay him (probably in grain) –
but your "pay" came at harvest time –
when you had enough food to feed your family for the next year!

Diligence and hard work didn't mean that you were working 14 hours every day nonstop!
Diligence and hard work meant that you did your work when it needed to be done –
so that you'd have food for the rest of the year!

And this is contrasted with various "get-rich-quick" schemes:

²⁰ *A faithful man will abound with blessings,
but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished.*

Don't be in a hurry.
Shortcuts invariably go wrong.
Be faithful in your work – and you will abound with blessings.

And verse 21 reminds us how easy it is to go wrong:

²¹ *To show partiality is not good,
but for a piece of bread a man will do wrong.*

"Taking a bribe is a quick route to a fast buck" (Waltke, 424)

Verse 22 warns how we look at wealth:

²² *A stingy man^[d] hastens after wealth
and does not know that poverty will come upon him.*

The "stingy man" is literally the "man of an evil eye" –
his eye is corrupted and he sees all things amiss.
He hastens after wealth – but he does not see that his path will lead only to poverty.

Verse 23 then warns against flattery:

²³ *Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor
than he who flatters with his tongue.*

The flatterer may seem to get farther at first.
Everyone loves flattery for a while –
 but in time it gets old and stale.
The one who rebukes will *afterward* find more favor.
 Learn to rebuke well!
 It's why we always encourage you to be good complainers!

Rebuke a wise man and he will love you!

Verse 24 shows us another way to get rich quick:

²⁴ *Whoever robs his father or his mother
and says, "That is no transgression,"
is a companion to a man who destroys.*

Robbing your parents – how is that a sin?
 You're the heir – you're going to inherit it anyway!
 How is that robbery?

It's the same logic that people have when they steal from their employer.
 "I deserved it – I work hard."

But Proverbs says that in so doing you become the companion of the destroyer.

The common theme in all these pictures is that they portray someone increasing their own wealth
at the expense of others.

Your wealth should come from your own labor.
 Your wealth should come from the way in which *your work*
 increases the value of your community.

Here's the basic principle:
 if no one gets out of bed and works, then there will be no food!

So if you just live off the work of others – then you are a parasite.
 You are not actually contributing to the community.
 You are contributing to the destruction of the community.

The final section of our chapter urges us to keep our focus:

c. Trust in the LORD, Walk in Wisdom, and Give to the Poor (v25-27)
²⁵ *A greedy man stirs up strife,
but the one who trusts in the LORD will be enriched.*

What is it that you want?
Are you greedy?

Are your eyes set on stuff and status?
Or are your eyes set on the LORD?

Verse 26 offers another contrast:

²⁶ *Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool,
but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.*

If you trust in your own mind – then you are a fool.
Remember that in Hebrew there is no separate word for “mind” –
or, more precisely, the word “heart” refers to the *thinking* part of us.
If you trust in your own heart – if you trust in your own thinking –
your own mind – then you are a fool.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not rest on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

And v27 says that:

²⁷ *Whoever gives to the poor will not want,
but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse.*

Don't hide your eyes from those in need.

That doesn't mean that you should give money to every panhandler you see!
It's worth remembering that 'the poor' in Solomon's day were not anonymous.

They lived in small towns – small communities –
and everyone knew everyone's business!
You know who the poor are – and why they are poor.
And Solomon says, “whoever gives to the poor will not want.”
Yes, it's a mess – but remember that you are part of this mess.
This is your community.
These are your people.

When we hide ourselves from the problems – when we hide our eyes –
we bring many a curse upon ourselves,
because we think that if we ignore the problem,
someone else will deal with it.

But that is not the path of wisdom.

The path of wisdom says that this is our community – these are our people –
and so we need to part of the solution – not just handing them \$20,
but giving to the poor in a way that will truly help them.

And so verse 28 brings us almost to the center of our passage!

3. The Rise of the Wicked (People Hide) vs. the Death of the Wicked (the Righteous Increase) (v28)

²⁸ *When the wicked rise, people hide themselves,
but when they perish, the righteous increase.*

It's where we will stop for tonight –
but it's important to understand that really
we are approaching the middle point of the passage.

It is perhaps noteworthy that verse 28 describes Hezekiah's reign.
In Hezekiah's day, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed.
Samaria fell to the Assyrians.

The wicked perished – and the righteous increased!
The righteous came out of hiding – as many of the faithful in Israel
fled to Judah and joined themselves to Hezekiah.

Don't be afraid!
Sure, right now the wicked rule – and so we need to keep our heads low.
But the wicked *never* rule for very long –
not for more than a few hundred years!

So what if this continues until our great-grandchildren's day?!
Jesus is still king!
Just like he was in the middle ages –
when kings and popes became all full of themselves!

Jesus is still king!
Just like he was in the 19th century when our African-American brothers
were held in slavery by professing Christians –
who were rather full of themselves!

When people are wise in their own eyes – when they trust in their own hearts –
we make a mess of things!

But Jesus is still king!
And while we wander in the wilderness – the faithful hope for the promised land!