

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

A new series of Solomon's proverbs. God's glory in mysteries. Observations concerning kings. Avoid contentions. Opportune speech. The faithful ambassador. Delicacies to be sparingly used. Avoid familiarity. Amusements not grateful to a distressed mind. Do good to your enemies. The misery of dwelling with a scold. The necessity of moderation and self-government.

Verse 1

These are also proverbs of Solomon - In my old MS. Bible, this verse concludes the preceding chapter. It seems that the remaining part of this book contains proverbs which had been collected by the order of King Hezekiah, and were added to the preceding book as a sort of supplement, having been collected from traditionary sayings of Solomon. And as the men of Hezekiah may mean Isaiah, Shebna, and other inspired men, who lived in that time, we may consider them as of equal authority with the rest, else such men could not have united them to the sacred book. The chronological notes in the margin of this and the five following chapters denote the time when the proverbs contained in them were collected together in the reign of Hezekiah, about two hundred and seventy years after the death of Solomon.

Verse 2

It is the glory of God to conceal a thing - This has been understood as referring to the revelation of God's will in his word, where there are many things concealed in parables, allegories, metaphors, similitudes, etc. And it is becoming the majesty of God so to publish his will, that it must be seriously studied to be understood, in order that the truth may be more prized when it is discovered. And if it be God's glory thus partially to conceal his purposes, it is the glory of a king to search and examine this word, that he may understand how by Him kings reign and princes decree judgment. Prophecies are partially concealed; and we cannot fully know their meaning till their accomplishment; and then the glory of God's wisdom and providence will be more particularly evident, when we see the event correspond so particularly and exactly with the prediction. I know not, however, that there are not matters in the Book of God that will not be fully opened till mortality is swallowed up of life. For here we see through a glass darkly; but there, face to face: here we know in part; but there we shall know as we also are known.

On this subject I cannot withhold an extract of a letter sent to myself, by a royal and learned personage. (His Royal Highness the Duke of Sussex.)

“As far as I have presumed to dive into and occupy myself with the sacred volumes, I feel satisfied of their Divine origin and truth. And I am satisfied, likewise, that they contain more matter than any one, and myself in particular, can ever aspire fully to understand. This belief, however, ought in nowise to slacken our diligence, or damp our ardor, in attempting a constant pursuit after the attainment of knowledge and truth; as we may flatter ourselves, although unable to reach the gate, we are still approaching nearer to its portals, which of itself is a great blessing.”

This sentiment will be approved by every pious and enlightened mind.

Verse 3

The heaven for height - The simple meaning of this is, the reasons of state, in reference to many acts of the executive government, can no more be fathomed by the common people, than the height of the heavens and the depth of the earth.

Verse 4

Take away the dross from the silver - You cannot have a pure silver vessel till you have purified the silver; and no nation can have a king a public blessing till the wicked - all bad counsellors, wicked and interested ministers, and sycophants - are banished from the court and cabinet. When the wise and good only are the king's ministers and advisers, then the throne will be established in righteousness, and his administration be a universal blessing.

Verse 7

Come up hither - Our Lord refers to this, see Luke 14:8 (note), and the notes there. Be humble; affect not high things; let those who are desperate climb dangerous precipices; keep thyself quiet, and thou shalt live at ease, and in peace. Hear the speech of a wise heathen on this subject: -

Quid fuit, ut tutas agitare Daedalus alas;
Icarus immensas nomine signet aquas?
Nempe quod hic alte, dimissus ille volabat.
Nam pennas ambo nonne habuere suas?

Crede mihi; bene qui latuit, bene vixit; et infra
Fortunam debet quisque manere suam.
Vive sine invidia; mollesque inglorius annos
Exige: amicitias et tibi junge pares.
Ovid, Trist. lib. iii., El. 4, ver. 21.

“Why was it that Daedalus winged his way safely, while Icarus his son fell, and gave name to the Icarian sea? Was it not because the son flew aloft, and the father skimmed the ground? For both were furnished with the same kind of wings. Take my word for it, that he who lives privately lives safely; and every one should live within his own income. Envy no man; pray for a quiet life, though it should not be dignified. Seek a friend, and associate with thy equals.”

Verse 8

Go not forth hastily to strive - חָרַץ (harib), to enter into a lawsuit. Keep from this pit or the bottomless deep, unless urged by the direst necessity.

Verse 9

Debate thy cause with thy neighbor - Take the advice of friends. Let both sides attend to their counsels; but do not tell the secret of thy business to any. After squandering your money away upon lawyers, both they and the judge will at last leave it to be settled by twelve of your fellow citizens! O the folly of going to law! O the blindness of men, and the rapacity of unprincipled lawyers!

On this subject I cannot but give the following extract from Sir John Hawkins’s Life of Dr. Johnson, which he quotes from Mr. Selwin, of London: “A man who deliberates about going to law should have,

1. A good cause;

2. A good purse;

3. A good skillful attorney;

4. Good evidence;

5. Good able counsel;

6. A good upright judge;

7. A good intelligent jury; and with all these on his side, if he have not,

8. Good luck, it is odds but he miscarries in his suit.” O the glorious uncertainty of the law!

Verse 11

A word fitly spoken - חֶסֶד חֶסֶד חֶסֶד (al ophannaiv), upon its wheels. An observation, caution, reproof, or advice, that comes in naturally, runs smoothly along, is not forced nor dragged in, that appears to be without design, to rise out of the conversation, and though particularly relative to one point, will appear to the company to suit all.

Is like apples of gold in pictures of silver - - Is like the refreshing orange or beautiful citron, served up in open work or filigree baskets, made of silver. The Asiatics excel in filigree silver work. I have seen much of it, and it is exquisitely beautiful. The silver wire by which it is done they form into the appearance of numerous flowers; and though these wires are soldered everywhere at their junctions with each other, yet this is done with such delicacy and skill as to be scarcely perceptible. I have seen animals formed on this filigree work, with all their limbs, and every joint in its natural play. Fruit-baskets are made also in this way, and are exquisitely fine. The wise man seems to have this kind of work particularly in view; and the contrast of the golden yellow fruit in the exquisitely wrought silver basket, which may be all termed picture work, has a fine and pleasing effect upon the eye, as the contained fruit has upon the palate at an entertainment in a sultry climate. So the word spoken judiciously and opportunely is as much in its place, as the golden apples in the silver baskets.

Verse 12

As an ear-ring of gold - I believe חֶסֶד חֶסֶד (nezem) to mean the nose-ring with its pendants; the left nostril is pierced, and a ring put through it, as in the ear. This is very common in almost every part of the East, among women of condition. This is a farther illustration of the above metaphor.

Verse 13

As the cold of snow - That snow was frequent in Judea, is well known; and that in the East they have snow-houses - places dug under ground, where they lay up snow for summer use - is also a fact. By means of the mass of snow deposited in them the icy temperature is kept up, so that the snow is easily preserved. The common method of cooling their wine, which is as easy as it is effectual, is by dipping a cloth in water,

wrapping it round the bottle, and then hanging the bottle in the heat of the sun. The strong evaporation carries off the caloric from the wine, and the repetition of the wet cloth in the same exposure, makes the wine almost as cold as ice.

How agreeable this must be in a burning climate, may be easily conceived. Perhaps it is this to which the wise man refers; for it is a fact that they could have no snow in harvest unless such as had been preserved as mentioned above; but this could be only in a few places, and within the reach of a very few persons. But cooling their liquors by the simple mode of evaporation already explained, was within the reach even of the laborers in the harvest field. I think the text favors this supposition; for *כִּטְסִינֶרֶת שֶׁלֶג* (*ketsinnereth sheleg*), need not be referred to snow itself procuring cold, but to a coldness like that of snow, procured by evaporation. If this interpretation be allowed, all difficulty will be removed.

Verse 14

A false gift - *מַתַּת שֶׁקֶר* (*mattath shaker*), a lying gift, one promised, but never bestowed. *Who so maketh greates boasts, and giveth nothing;* Coverdale. So the Vulgate: *Vir gloriosus, et promissa non complens;* A bragging man, who does not fulfill his promises, is like clouds which appear to be laden with vapor, and like the wind which, though it blow from a rainy quarter, brings no moistness with it. So the vain boaster; he is big with promise, but performs nothing.

Verse 15

A soft tongue breaketh the bone - This is similar to another proverb on the same subject: *A soft answer turneth away wrath.* An angry word does nothing but mischief.

Verse 16

Hast thou found honey? - Make a moderate use of all thy enjoyments. *Let thy moderation be known unto all, and appear in all things.*

Verse 17

Withdraw thy foot - Another proverb will illustrate this: *Too much familiarity breeds contempt.*

Verse 20

As vinegar upon nitre - The original word *נָתַר* (*nather*) is what is known among chemists as the natron of the ancients and of the Scriptures, and carbonate of soda. It is found native in Syria and India, and occurs as an efflorescence on the soil. In Tripoli it is found in crystalline incrustations of from one third to half an inch thick. It is found also in solution in the water of some lakes in Egypt and Hungary. The borders of these lakes are covered with crystalline masses, of a grayish white or light brown color; and in some specimens the natron is nearly pure carbonate of soda, and the carbonate is easily discovered by effervescing with an acid. It appears to have its Hebrew name from *נָתַר* (*nathar*), to dissolve or loosen: because a solution of it in water is abstersive, taking out spots, etc. It is used in the East for the purposes of washing. If vinegar be poured on it, Dr. Shaw says a strong fermentation immediately takes place, which illustrates what Solomon says here: *The singing of songs to a heavy heart is like vinegar upon natron:* that is, *there is no affinity between them; and opposition, colluctation, and strife, are occasioned by any attempt to unite them.* And poureth vyneper upon chalke - Coverdale. This also will occasion an effervescence. See Jeremiah 2:22.

Verse 21

If thine enemy be hungry - See this and the next verse explained, Romans 12:20 (note).

Verse 22

Thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head - Not to consume, but to melt him into kindness; a metaphor taken from smelting metallic ores: -

So artists melt the sullen ore of lead,
By heaping coals of fire upon its head:
In the kind warmth the metal learns to glow,
And pure from dross the silver runs below.
S. Wesley.

Verse 23

The north wind driveth away rain - The margin has, *The north wind bringeth forth rain.* It is said that the north wind brings forth rain at Jerusalem, because it brings with it the vapours arising from the sea that lies north of it. The marginal is the true reading; and is supported by the Chaldee, Syriac, and Septuagint; but the Arabic reads south wind.

A backbiting tongue - A hidden tongue.

Verse 24

It is better to dwell in a corner - See the note on Proverbs 21:9 (note).

Verse 27

It is not good to eat much honey - Coverdale translates the whole passage thus: "æLike as it is not good to eat to much hony; even so, he that wyll search out hye thinges, it shal be to hevy for him." As he that etith myche honye, and it is not to him goode; so, that is a sercher of mageste, schal ben oppressid of glorie - Old MS. Bible. He that searches too much into mysteries, is likely to be confounded by them. I really think this is the meaning of the place; and shall not puzzle either myself or my reader with the discordant explanations which have been brought forward with the hope of illustrating this passage.