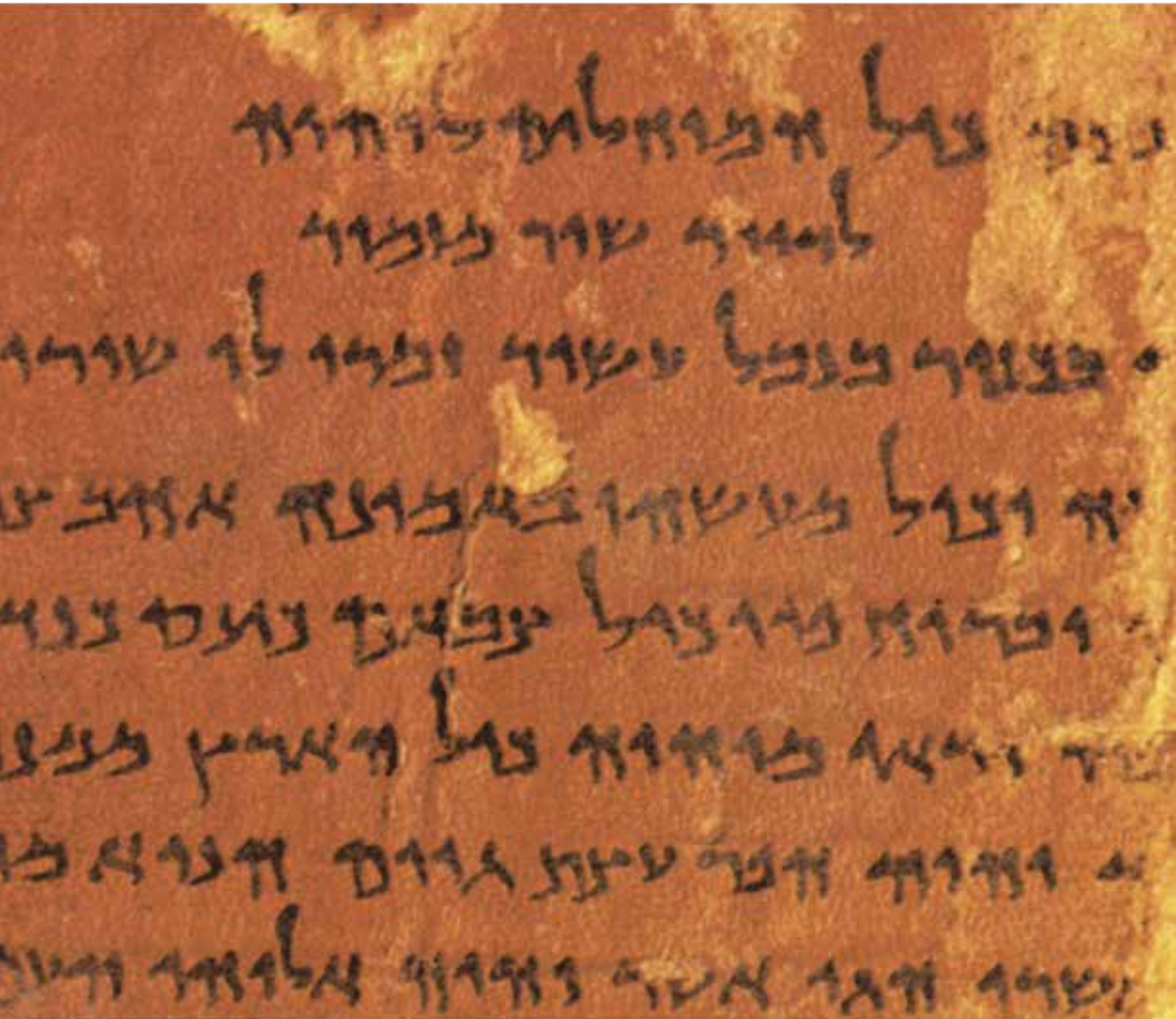


Proverbs

Selected comments on twenty-two proverbs



CHARLES BRIDGES (1794-1869)

PROVERBS

*Exposition of the Book of Proverbs
(selected verses)*

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Chapter 1:7 – Wisdom

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning [margin: principal part] of knowledge:
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

THE preface has stated the object of this Book of Wisdom. The book itself now opens with a noble sentence. “There is not,” as Bishop Patrick observes, “such a wise instruction to be found in all their books [speaking of Heathen ethics], as the very first of all in Solomon’s, which he lays as the ground of all wisdom.”¹ *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.* So Job had pronounced before (Job 28:28). So had the wise man’s father (Psa 111:10). Such is the weight of this saying, that Solomon again repeats it (Pro 9:10). Nay, after having gone round the whole circuit, after having weighed exactly all the sources of knowledge, his conclusion of the whole matter is this: that *the fear of God* in its practical exercise “is the whole of man” (Ecc 12:13; cp.² Job 28:12-14, with 28)—all his duty, all his happiness, his first lesson and his last. Thus, when about to instruct us from the mouth of God, he begins *at the beginning, the principal part*. All heathen wisdom is but folly. Of all knowledge, the knowledge of God is the *principal*. There is no true knowledge without godliness (cp. Deu 4:6, 7).

But what is this *fear of the Lord*? It is that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law. His wrath is so bitter, and his love so sweet; that hence springs an earnest desire to please him, and—because of the danger of coming short from his own weakness and temptations—a holy watchfulness and *fear*, “that he might not sin against Him” (Heb 12:28, 29). This enters into every exercise of the mind, every object of life (Pro 23:17). The oldest proficient in the Divine school seeks a more complete molding into its spirit. The godly parent trains up his family under its influence (Gen 18:19; Eph 6:4). The Christian scholar honors it as *the beginning*, the head, *of all his knowledge*; at once sanctifying its end, and preserving him from its most subtle temptations.

Why then do multitudes around us *despise wisdom and instruction*? Because *the beginning of wisdom—the fear of God*—is not “before their eyes” (Psa 36:1). They know not its value. They scorn its obligation. Wise they may be in their own sight. But surely God here gives them their right name. For *fools* they must be, to *despise* such a blessing (Jer 8:9); to rush into willful ruin (Pro 1:22, 24-32; cp. 1Sa 2:25; 1Ki 12:13; Jer 36:22-32); to treasure up work for despairing repentance (Pro 5:12, 13; 29:1). Good Lord! May thy childlike *fear* be my *wisdom*, my security, my happiness!

¹ Preface to his *Paraphrase*.

² cp. – compare.

Chapter 1:10-16

Stand against Temptation

My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. If they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood; let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause: Let us swallow them up alive as the grave; and whole as those who go down into the pit: We shall all precious substance; we shall fill our houses with spoil: Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse: My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path: For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood.

Let the young *hearken to the instruction and law* of the godly parent and minister. Who that has the charge of youth does not mourn over the baneful³ influence of evil companions? Would that the Lord's servants *were* as energetic in His work, as *sinners* are in furthering the ends of their master! Almost as soon as Satan became apostate, he became a tempter. And most successfully does he train his servants in this work. (Pro 16:29; Gen 11:4; Num 31:16; Isa 56:12). *If sinners entice thee*. This is no uncertain contingency, "My son", said the wise son of Sirach, "if thou come to serve the Lord prepare thy heart for temptation" (Apocrypha⁴ Book of Ecclesiasticus 2:1). Yet we have one rule against all manifold enticements (Pro 7:5-23; cp. Deu 13:6-8; 1Ch 21:1; 1Ki 13:15-19)—*Consent thou not*. *Consent* constitutes the sin. Eve *consented*, before she plucked the fruit (Gen 3:6); David, before he committed the act of sin (2Sa 11:2-4; cp. Jos 7:21). Joseph resisted and was saved (Gen 39:8, 9). Job was sorely tried; "yet in all this, Job sinned not" (Job 1:22; 2:10). If the temptation prevail, charge it not on God; no—nor on the devil. As the worst he can do, he can only tempt, he cannot force us, to sin. When he has plied us with his utmost power, and most subtle artifice,⁵ it is at the choice of our own will, whether we yield or no (see Jam 1:13-15). The habitual resistance of the will clears us of responsibility (cp. Rom 7:14-17, 19, 20, 23). The *consent*, even if it be not carried out into the act, lays the responsibility at our own door.

The *enticement* here was to robbery and blood; covetousness leading to murder. Most fiendish was the plot. The *innocent* was to be murdered *without cause* (Gen 4:8; Psa 10:8), *swallowed up alive and whole*; like Korah and his company, *going down into the pit* in their full strength (Num 16:33). The invitation at first was seemingly harmless: *only come with us*. Soon the demand rises: *Cast in thy lot with us*. "But we shall be discovered." "No," they reply, "we will do all so cleverly, that there will be no more blood to be seen, than if the earth swallowed them up; or they died a natural death, and were decent-

³ **baneful** – life destroying; destructive to well-being.

⁴ *The Apocrypha* – books of ancient Hebrew writings, which are not a part of the canon of Scripture, the inspired Word of God. Many scholars consider them valuable as ancient texts for study.

⁵ **artifice** – cunning; trickery.

ly buried.”⁶ *The spoil of precious substance will be found*, when our victim is destroyed (cp. Mat 21:38). *Precious substance!* Why! This is as large a promise, as that from the mouth of the Son of God (Pro 8:21). But how can substance be found belonging to a world of shadows (Psa 39:6)? Much more, how can the fruit of robbery be *precious*, with the curse of God (Pro 21:6; Psa 62: 9, 10)?

Not that this horrible plot is usually propounded⁷ at first. But step by step, unless the Lord graciously restrains, it may come to this at last. The cover and varnish are here taken off, to show what sin is in its nature, character, and certain end. What young man but would shudder and start away from the wickedness, if presented to his imagination alone? But many a deluded sinner is thus hurried on by the influence of company to lengths of sin, that he had never contemplated. Other *enticements* are prepared for the amiable and the uninitiated, just entering into life; less fearful and obvious, and therefore more really dangerous. Such “advantage does Satan get of us...ignorant of his devices” (2Co 2:11)!

Is it safe then to trust in our good resolutions or principles? No—*Walk not in the way with them*. The invitation is: *Come with us*. The warning is *Refrain thy foot from their path* (Pro 4:14, 15; cp. Psa 1:1). Avoid parleying⁸ with them. No one becomes a profligate⁹ at once. But “evil communications corrupt good manners” (1Co 15:33). The tender conscience becomes less sensitive by every compliance. Who can stop himself in the downhill road? One sin prepares for another, pleads for it, nay, even makes it necessary for concealment. David committed murder to hide his adultery, and for his covering charged it upon the providence of God (2Sa 11:4, 17, 25).

Again then, we repeat with all earnestness, *Refrain*. *The path* may be strewed¹⁰ with flowers; but it is a path of *evil*, perhaps of *blood*.¹¹ Every step on Satan’s ground deprives us of the security of the promises of God. Often has ruin followed by not *refraining* from the first step (cp. Mar 14:54, 71). The only safety is in flight (Gen 39:10, 12). Run then into “thy hiding-place, and behind thy shield,” and boldly bid thy tempter “depart from thee” (Psa 119:114, 115; cp. Mat 4:10). Awful is the thought! There is not a sin that the highest saint of God may not commit, if trusting in himself. “Thou standest by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear” (Rom 11:20).

⁶ Cartwright. But see Gen 4:10; 2Ki 9:26.

⁷ **propounded** – put forward for consideration.

⁸ **parleying** – having a discussion.

⁹ **profligate** – a person with extremely low morals.

¹⁰ **strewed** – scattered on the ground.

¹¹ Pro 1:16; Isa 59:7. An apt illustration of the total depravity of man in the perverted use of the members of his body—Rom 3:15.

Chapter 2:1-6 – Study the Word

*My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding;
If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures;
Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.*

Wisdom, having solemnly warned rebellious scorers, now instructs her dutiful children. The dark question long before asked—“Where shall wisdom be found?” (Job 28:12, 20, 21)—is now answered. It is here set before us as *the fear and knowledge of God* (Pro 2:5); a principle of practical godliness (Pro 2:7-9); a preservation from besetting temptations (Pro 2:10-19); and a guide into the right and safe path (Pro 2:20). Hence follow the security of its scholars (Pro 2:21), and the certain ruin of its ungodly despisers (Pro 2:22).

The rules for its attainment are such as the simplest comprehension can apply. Carefully pondered, and diligently improved, they will furnish a key for the understanding of the whole Word of God. Let us examine them more distinctly.

Receive my words. Let them be “the seed cast into the ground of an honest and good heart” (Luk 8:15), a heart prepared of God (Pro 16:1). Read the Book of God as one who “sat at the feet of Jesus, and heard His word” (Luk 10:39). Like the Bereans, “receive it with all readiness” (Act 17:11); like the Thessalonians, with reverential faith, acknowledging its supreme authority (1Th 2:13). *Hide my commandments with thee.* Carry them about with thee as thy choicest treasure for greater security (Col 3:16, with Mat 13:44); as thy furniture always at hand for present use (Pro 4:20, 21; 7:3; Job 22:22). Let the heart be the hiding-place for the treasure (Luk 2:19, 51; Psa 119:11). Satan can never snatch it thence.

But there must be an active, practical habit of attention.¹² Yet to *incline the ear, and apply the heart*—“who is sufficient for these things” (2Co 2:16)? Oh, my God! let it be Thine own work on me—in me. Thou alone canst do it.¹³ Let it be with me, as with Thy Beloved Son: “Waken my ear morning by morning to hear as the learned” (Isa 50:4). So let me under Thy grace, “incline mine ear, and hear, that my soul may live” (Isa 55:3).

Without this spirit of prayer, there may be attention and earnestness, yet not one spiritual impression upon the conscience, not one ray of Divine light in the soul. Earthly wisdom is gained by study; heavenly wisdom by prayer. Study may form a Biblical schol-

¹² Pro 22:17; 23:12. The Emperor Constantine stood hours to hear the Word; replying, when asked to sit, “That he thought it wicked to give negligent ears, when the truth handled was spoken of God”—*Eusebius, De Vita Constantini, Lib. iv.* Foxe records of Edward VI, “That never was he present at any sermon commonly, but would excerpt them, or note them with his own hand”—Vol. v. 700. Yet Bishop Hooper thought that his royal master’s love for the preached Word needed to be quickened—*Sermon 7th on Jonas.*

¹³ Pro 20:12. “Thou giving me the ear, I have heard, as thou wouldest thy Word to be heard”—Jerome on *Hab 3:2.*

ar; prayer puts the heart under a heavenly tutorage, and therefore forms the wise and spiritual Christian. The Word first comes into the ears; then it enters into the heart; there it is safely hid; thence rises the *cry*, the *lifting up of the voice*. Thus, “the entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple” (Psa 119:130). God keeps the key of the treasure house in His own hand. “For this He will be enquired of” (Eze 36:37) to open it unto thee. We look for no other inspiration than Divine grace to make His Word clear and impressive. Every verse read and meditated on furnishes material for prayer. Every text prayed over opens a mine of “unsearchable riches,” with a light from above, more clear and full than the most intelligent exposition. David (Psa 119:18, 100) and his wise son (1Ki 3:9-12) sought this learning upon their knees; and the most matured Christian will continue to the find to *lift up his voice* for a more enlarged *knowledge of God* (Eph 1:17, 18).

But prayer must not stand in the stead of diligence. Let it rather give energy to it.¹⁴ The miner’s indefatigable pains; his invincible resolution; his untiring perseverance; *seeking*, yea, *searching for hid treasures*—such must be our *searching* into the sacred storehouse. To read instead of “*searching* the Scriptures,” is only to skim the surface, and gather up a few superficial notions.¹⁵ The rule of success is—Dig up and down the field; and if the search be discouraging, dig again. The patient industry of perusal and re-perusal will open the embosomed¹⁶ treasure. “Surely there is a vein for the silver” (Job 28:1). Yet what miner would be content with the first ore? Would he not *search* deeper and deeper, until he has possessed himself of the whole; not satisfied with taking away much, but determined to leave nothing? Thus let us daily explore “the length, and the breadth, and the depth” of our boundless stores, until we be “filled with all the fulness of God” (Eph 3:18, 19).

¹⁴ Cp. Mat 11:12. “We are all,” says the heavenly Leighton, “too little in the humble seeking and begging this Divine knowledge; and that is the cause why we are so shallow and small proficients.” “If thou cry, and lift up thy voice for understanding, search for it as for hid treasures: sit down upon thy knees and dig for it. That is the best posture, to fall right upon the golden vein, and go deepest to know the mind of God, in searching the Scriptures, to be directed and regulated in His ways; to be made skillful in ways of honoring Him, and doing Him service. This neither man nor angels can teach him, but God alone”—*Sermon on Psalm 107:43*.

¹⁵ Cp. Joh 5:39. “I can speak it by experience,” said a wise man, “that there is little good to be gotten by reading the Bible cursorily and carelessly. But do it daily and diligently, with attention and affection; and you shall find such efficacy, as is to be found in no other book that can be named”—Erasmus’s *Preface to Luke*. Peter Martyr gives the same testimony, *Epistle Dedicatory to Commentary on Romans*. The following relic of our renowned Elizabeth will be read both with interest and profit. It was written on a blank leaf of a black-letter edition of St. Paul’s Epistles, which she used during her lonely imprisonment at Woodstock. The volume itself, curiously embroidered by her own hand, is preserved in the Bodleian: “August. I walk many times into the pleasant fields of the Holy Scriptures, where I pluck up the goodlisome herbs of sentences by pruning, eat them by reading, chew them by musing, and lay them up at length in the high seat of memory, by gathering them together, that so, having tasted their sweetness, I may the less perceive the bitterness of this miserable life”—Miss Strickland’s *Queens of England*, vi.113.

¹⁶ **embosomed** – cherished in one’s bosom or heart.

This habit of living in the element of Scripture is invaluable. To be filled from this Divine treasury; to have large portions of the Word daily passing through the mind; gives us a firmer grasp and a more suitable and diversified application of it. Yet this profit can only be fully reaped in retirement. We may read the Scriptures in company. But to *search* them, we must be alone with God. Here we learn to apply ourselves wholly to the Word, and the Word wholly to us. This enriching study gives a purer vein of sound judgment. The mere reader often scarcely knows where to begin, and he performs the routine without any definite object. His knowledge therefore must be scanty and ineffective. Nor is the neglect of this habit less hurtful to the Church. All fundamental errors and heresies in the Church may be traced to this source—“Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures” (Mat 22:29). They are mostly based on partial or disjointed statements of truth. Truth separated from truth becomes error. But the mind prayerfully occupied in the *search* of Divine truth, *crying* and *lifting up the voice*, will never fail to discern the two great principles of godliness: *the fear and the knowledge of God*. There is no peradventure¹⁷ nor disappointment in this search—*Then shalt thou understand. The Lord giveth wisdom; it cometh out of his mouth*. None shall search in vain (Job 32:8; Isa 48:17; 54:13; Jam 1:5, 17; cp. Gen 41:38, 39; Exo 4:12; Dan 1:17). Never has apostasy from the faith been connected with a prayerful and diligent study of the Word of God.

Chapter 2:10, 11 – Wisdom Preserves

*When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul;
Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee.*

We have seen the good that *wisdom* brings to us (Pro 2:5). Now see the evil, from which it *preserves* us. But observe its place—*in the heart*. Here only has it any light, life, or power (Pro 4:23). Clear knowledge floating in the head is deep ignorance. While it only glitters in the understanding, it is dry, speculative, and barren. *When it entereth into the heart*, light beams out, all the affections are engaged; and how *pleasant is it to the soul!* (Pro 24:13, 14; Job 23:12; Psa 119:103; Jer 15:16). Religion *now* is no lifeless notion. It is handled, tasted, enjoyed. It gives a *discreet* and *understanding* direction to the whole conduct. It becomes not only an external rule, but a *preserving, keeping* principle (Pro 4:6; 6:22-24; Psa 17:4; 119:9-11, 104); like the military guard for the safety of the royal person (Isa 26:16; 2Ki 11:11).

Before, it was the object of our search. Now, having found it, it is our *pleasure*. Until it is so, it can have no practical influence. It is the man whose “delight is in the law of the Lord,” who is preserved from “walking in the counsel of the ungodly” (Psa 1:1, 2; cp. Pro 7:4, 5). Education, conviction, high moral principle are at best only partially operative. The reclaimed drunkard may be true to his Temperance-pledge; but, if the “root of bit-

¹⁷ **peradventure** – uncertainty; doubt.

terness” be untouched, he may be a Socialist or a Chartist¹⁸ or revel in some other equally ruinous course. External wickedness may be exchanged for decent formality. Vagrant affections may be turned from some object of vanity; yet not fixed upon the Divine center of attraction. The mind may be disciplined from utter unprofitableness, only to indulge in the idolatry of talent, or the fascinations of poisoned literature. The folly of the pride of life may be resisted; yet pride in other of its multiform¹⁹ fruits tenderly cherished. In all these cases, the principle is unsubdued. The forsaken sin only makes way for some more plausible, but not less deadly passion. The heart, cast into the mold of the Gospel, is the only cover from those snares within and without (Rom 6:17, 18; 2Co 3:18), which so imperceptibly, yet so fatally, estrange us from God. Never, till the vital principle is implanted, is their mischief discerned. Never, till then, does the heart find its proper object, its true resting-place.

Chapter 2:20-22

Wisdom: Blessings and Warnings

That thou mayest walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous: For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it; But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it.

Here is the consummating blessing of engrafted wisdom. Not only does it deliver from evil men; but it guides us *into the way of good men*. Clad with this Divine armor, thou shalt have courage, like Joseph, to turn thy face from the enchantment of Sin (Gen 39:9, 10), *and keep the paths of the righteous*, rugged indeed, yet the only paths of rest and security (Song 1:7, 8; Jer 6:16). Thus shalt thou *dwell and remain in the land*, as its original inheritor (Psa 37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34; Mat 5:5); having the best portion in earth, and an infinitely better portion in heaven; while *the wicked and transgressors*, though they may “enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season,” shall be ultimately *cut off, rooted out*, and “driven away” into everlasting ruin (Pro 10:30; 14:32; 15:25; Psa 52:5-7; 92:7; Mat 3:10).

And now, what serious reader of this chapter can fail to estimate above all price the privilege of being early enlisted under the banner of the cross; early taught in the ways, and disciplined in the school of the Bible; and early led to hide that blessed book in the heart, as the rule of life, the principle of holiness, the guide to heaven!

Parents, sponsors, teachers of youth, ponder your deep responsibility with unceasing prayer for special grace and wisdom. Beware of glossing over sins with amiable or palliat-

¹⁸ **Chartist** – member of a British working-class movement for political reform named after the People’s Charter, active from 1838 to 1848.

¹⁹ **multiform** – many and various kinds.

ing²⁰ terms. Let young people be always led to look upon vicious habits with horror, as the most appalling evil. Discipline their vehemence of feeling, and all ill-regulated excitement. Keep out of sight, as far as may be, books calculated to inflame the imagination. To give impulse to the glowing passion may stimulate the rising corruption to the most malignant fruitfulness. Oh! What wisdom is needed to guide, to repress, to bring forth, to develop safely, and to improve fully—the mind, energies, and sensibilities of youth!

Young man! Beware! Do not flatter thyself for a moment that God will ever wink at your sinful passions; that He will allow for them, as slips and foibles²¹ of youth. They are the “cords of your own sins,” which, if the power of God’s grace break them not in time, will “hold” you for eternity (Pro 5:22). Shun then the society of sin, as the infection of the plague. Keep thy distance from it, as from the pit of destruction. Store thy mind with the preservative of heavenly wisdom. Cultivate the taste for purer pleasures. Listen to the fatherly, pleading remonstrance,²² inviting thee to thy rest—“Wilt thou not from this time cry unto me, ‘My Father! Thou art the guide of my youth?’” (Jer 3:4).

Chapter 3:5, 6 – Beware of Self

*Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not to thine own understanding.
In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*

This is the polar star²³ of a child of God—faith in his Father’s providence, promises, and grace. The unmeaning expression of *trust* on the lips of the ignorant and ungodly is a fearful delusion. What ground of confidence can there be when there is everything to fear? Can the sinner’s God, a just, avenging God, be an object of *trust*? What owe we to that precious atonement which has opened up our way to a reconciled God (Rom 5:11), and assured our confidence in Him as our Friend and Counselor! Nor is this the cold assent of the enlightened judgment. It is the *trust of the heart, of all the heart*. It is a child-like, unwavering (Psa 78, 2Ch 14:11; contrast Jer 1:6-8) confidence in our Father’s well-proved wisdom, faithfulness, and love. Any limit to this confidence is a heinous provocation (Psa 78:18-22). He is truth itself. Therefore, He would have us take Him at His Word, and prove His Word to the utmost extent of His power.

But our *trust* must not only be *entire*: it must be *exclusive*. No other confidence, no confidence in the flesh, can consist with it (cp. Phi 3:3). Man with all his pride feels that he wants something to *lean to*. As a fallen being, he naturally *leans to himself*, to his own

²⁰ **palliating** – disguising the real enormity of an offense by favorable representations; representing an evil as less than it really is.

²¹ **foibles** – weaknesses or failing of character.

²² **remonstrance** – appeal; request.

²³ **polar star** – guiding or governing principle.

foolish notions and false fancies. Human power is his idol. His *understanding* is his god. Many would rather be convicted of want²⁴ of principle than want of talent. Many bring God's truth to their own bar and cavil²⁵ at it, as an excuse for rejecting it. In these and other ways, man "trusteth to himself, and his heart departeth from the Lord" (Jer 17:5). This is the history of the fall; the history of man from the fall; the dominant sin of every unhumiliated heart; the lamented and resisted sin of every child of God. Need we advert²⁶ to it as the sin of youth? How rare is the sight of the "younger submitting unto the elder" (1Pe 5:5)! If advice is asked, is it not with the hope of confirming a previously-formed purpose? In case of a contrary judgment, the young man's *own understanding* usually decides the course.

Great reason then is there for the warning—*Lean not to thine own understanding*. Once, indeed, it gave clear unclouded light, as man's high prerogative, "created in the image of God" (Gen 1:26; Col 3:10). But now, degraded as it is by the fall (Psa 49:20), and darkened by the corruption of the heart (Eph 4:18), it must be a false guide. Even in a prophet of God it proved a mistaken counselor (2Sa 7:2-5). Yet though we refuse to *lean* to it, to follow it may be implicit *trust in the Lord*; because it is a trust in His Divine power, enlightening it, as His lamp for our direction. The Christian on his knees, as if he cast his understanding away, confesses himself utterly unable to guide his path. But see him in his active life. He carefully improves his mind. He conscientiously follows its dictates. Thus practical faith strengthens—not destroys—its power; invigorates—not supercedes—exertion (cp. Gen 32:9-20; Neh 2:4-20; 4:9).

It is therefore our plain duty not to neglect *our understanding*, but to cultivate it diligently in all its faculties. In a world of such extended knowledge, ignorance is the fruit of sloth, dissipation,²⁷ or misguided delusion. But *lean not to thine understanding*. *Lean—trust in the Lord*. Self-dependence is folly (Pro 28:26), rebellion (Jer 2:13; 9:23), ruin (Gen 3:5, 6; Isa 47:10, 11). "The great folly of man in trials," as Dr. Owen justly remarks, "is *leaning to or upon his own understanding* and counsels. What is the issue of it? Whenever in our trials we consult our own understandings, hearken to self-reasonings, though they seem to be good, and tending to our preservation; yet the principle of living by faith is stifled, and we shall in the issue be cast down by our own counsels."²⁸

Next, let our confidence be uniform: *In all thy ways acknowledge him*. Take one step at a time, every step under Divine warrant and direction (cp. Eze 18:21-23; Neh 1:11). Ever plan for yourself in simple dependence on God.²⁹ It is nothing less than self-idolatry to conceive that we can carry on even the ordinary matters of the day without His counsel. He loves to be consulted. Therefore, take all thy difficulties to be resolved by Him. Be in

²⁴ **want** – lack.

²⁵ **cavil** – to object or find fault without good reason.

²⁶ **advert** – turn one's attention to; pay attention.

²⁷ **dissipation** – overindulgence in the pursuit of pleasure.

²⁸ John Owen, *Treatise on Temptation*, chapter 8. Cp. Job 18:7; Hos 10:8.

²⁹ Jam 4:15. *If the Lord will*—as Fuller remarks with his pithy quaintness—"a parenthesis, and yet the most important part of the sentence."

the habit of going to Him in the first place—before self-will, self-pleasing,³⁰ self-wisdom, human friends, convenience, expediency.³¹ Before any of these have been consulted, go to God at once. Consider no circumstances too clear to need His direction.³² *In all thy ways*, small as well as great; in all thy concerns, personal or relative, temporal or eternal, let Him be supreme. Who of us has not found the unspeakable “peace” of bringing to God matters too minute or individual to be entrusted to the most confidential ear?³³ Abraham thus *acknowledged God*. Wheresoever he pitched a tent for himself, there was always an altar for God (Gen 12:7; 13:18). In choosing a wife for his son, there was a singular absence of worldliness. No mention was made of riches, honor, beauty; only of what concerned the name and honor of his God (Gen 24:1-8; cp. also his servant, verses 12-27). Thus did the wise man’s father *in all his ways acknowledge God*, asking counsel of Him in all his difficulties, and never disappointed.³⁴

Now if we be weaned from the idolatry of making our bosom our oracle, and our heart our counselor; if in true poverty of spirit we go every morning to our Lord, as knowing not how to guide ourselves for this day; our eye constantly looking upward for *direction* (Psa 5:3; 143:8-10; 25:4, 5), the light will come down.³⁵ *He shall direct thy paths*. We want no new revelations or visible tokens (such as Exo 13:21, 22). Study the Word with prayer. Mark the Divine Spirit shedding light upon it. Compare it with the observation of the providences of the day (Psa 107:43); not judging by constitutional bias³⁶ (a most doubtful interpreter), but pondering with sober, practical, reverential faith. Let the will be kept in a quiet, subdued, cheerful readiness, to move, stay, retreat, turn to the right hand or to the left, at the Lord’s bidding; always remembering that is best which is least our own doing, and that a pliable spirit ever secures the needful guidance (cp. Psa 32:8, 9; Isa 48:17, 18; with 30:21). We may “be led,” for the exercise of our faith, “in a way that we know not” (Isa 42:16; 50:10)—perhaps a way of disappointment, or even of mistake! Yet no step well prayed over will bring ultimate regret. Though the promise will not render us infallible; our very error will be overruled for deeper humiliation and self-knowledge; and thus even this mysterious *direction* will in the end be gratefully acknowledged—“He led me forth in the right way” (Psa 107:7).

³⁰ See the awful hypocrisy and judgment of asking counsel of God under this deadly influence: Jer 42:1-3, 19-22; Eze 14:1-6.

³¹ **expediency** – adherence to self-serving means.

³² See the evil consequence of this inconsiderate neglect: Jos 9:14.

³³ Phi 4:6, 7. “*In every thing.*”

³⁴ 1Sa 23:9-11; 30:6-8; 2Sa 2:1; 5:19. Compare the smarting rod from the neglect of this godly habit, 1Sa 27:1 with 29.

³⁵ Mat 6:22. Cp. Psa 32:8; 34:5; Neh 1:4-11; 2:4-8. Sir M. Hale left it on record, when nearly eighty years old, as his experience, that whenever he had committed his way simply and unreservedly to the Lord, He had always *directed his path*.

³⁶ **constitutional bias** – personal inclination or tendency; how one feels about a matter.

Chapter 3:11, 12 – Chastening

My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction; For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.

Prosperity and adversity in their wise mixture and proportion, form our present condition. Each is equally fruitful in opportunity of honoring the Lord; in prosperity—by the full consecration of *our substance* (Pro 3:9, 10); in adversity—by a humble and cheerful submission to its dispensation. “In prosperity it is well to expect the rod; and suppose it be His pleasure, let it not make thee either doubt of His gracious Providence, or out of impatience take any unlawful course to remove it from thee.”³⁷ His “exhortation,” the Apostle reminds us, “speaketh to us as unto children.”³⁸ And indeed, under no character does He approach so near to us, and endear Himself so closely to us, as that of a Father. Most precious at all times, especially under *correction*, is the privilege of adoption—*My son*.

Nowhere, indeed, are our corruptions so manifest, or our graces so shining, as under the rod. We need it as much as our daily bread. Children of God are still children of Adam; with Adam’s will, pride, independence, and waywardness. And nothing more distinctively requires Divine teaching and grace, than how to preserve in our behavior the just mean between hardness and despondency; *neither despising the chastening of the Lord, nor being weary of His correction*.³⁹

Too often, while we guard against an error on the right hand, we forget one not less hurtful on the left; like the man, who, in guarding against the precipice on the one side, rushes into some fearful hazard on the other. The middle path is the right path. Doubtless the Lord means His *chastening* to be felt (2Sa 15:26. Psa 39:10, 11). A leviathan⁴⁰ iron-heartedness (Job 41:24-29; Jer 5:3) is the stubbornness of the flesh, not the triumph of the spirit; a frame most offensive to Him, and most unseemly for the reception of His gracious discipline. To be as though no pain was felt or cared for; sullenly to “kick against the pricks” (Act 9:5; cp. Pro 19:3), and to dare God to do His worst—this is, indeed, to *despise His chastening*.⁴¹ But pride will lift up the head, stiff and unbending: many a stroke does it require to bring it down.

³⁷ Bishop Patrick.

³⁸ Heb 12:5. We must not overlook the Apostle’s testimony to the Divine inspiration of the Book, showing the instruction throughout to be the teaching of our Heavenly Father to His beloved children.

³⁹ The philosopher’s definition is striking and accurate, but infinitely above his own practical standard—“*Non sentire mala tua, non est hominis; et non ferre, non est viri*”—(It is inhuman not to feel thine afflictions, and unmanly not to bear them)—Seneca, *Consol. ad Polyb*, c. 36.

⁴⁰ **leviathan** – the name of some sea-creature of enormous size mentioned in the Bible; therefore, huge, monstrous.

⁴¹ Compare Pharaoh—Exo 7:23; Jehoram—2Ki 6:31; Ahaz—2Ch 28:22; Israel—Isa 1:5. Zep 3:2. Cp. Job 15:25, 26.

Yet, alas! this is not the sin only of the ungodly. Often do we see the child of God in an undutiful spirit (Job 5:17; Heb 12:6), caring little whether his Father smiles or frowns. The *chastening* is lightly passed over. He considers only second causes, or immediate instruments (Amo 3:6). He is irritated by looking at the rod, rather than at the hand that inflicts it (2Ch 16:10-12). He shrinks from searching into the cause. He disregards his Father's loving voice and purpose. Hence there is no softening humiliation (Psa 32:3, 4); no "acceptance of the punishment of iniquity" (Lev 26:41, 43); no child-like submission; no exercise of faith in looking for support. Is not this to *despise the chastening of the Lord*?

But while some *despise* the hand of God as light, others "faint" under it as heavy (Heb 12:5; Psa 38:2, 3; 39:10). They are *weary of His correction*. Beware of yielding to heartless despondency, or fretful impatience (Psa 73:14; 77:7-10). Resist hard and dishonorable thoughts of God (Gen 42:36; Jdg 6:13; Jon 4:9). Their very admission spreads destruction. Very apt are we to judge amiss of our Father's dealings⁴² to neglect present duty; to cherish a morbid brooding over our sorrows (Job 6:1-16); to forget our title and privilege of adoption (Heb 12:5); or in obstinate grief to "refuse to be comforted" with the "hope of the end" (Psa 77:2; cp. Jer 29:11; 31:15-17). And is not this to be *weary of His correction*?

But these rules imply much more than their negative meaning. Instead of *despising*, reverence *the chastening of the Lord*. Let it be a solemn remembrance to thee, that thou art under thy Father's *correction* (Lam 3:28, 29; Mic 7:9). Receive it then in good part. Instead of being *weary* of it, hang upon His chastening hand, and pour thy very soul into His bosom (1Sa 1:10-15). Kiss the rod (Job 34:31, 32; 1Pe 5:6). Acknowledge its humbling, but enriching, benefit (Psa 119:67-71). Expect a richer blessing from sustaining grace, than from the removal of the deprecated⁴³ affliction (2Co 12:7-10).

After all we must add, that chastening is a trial to the flesh (Heb 12:11); yet overruled by wonder-working wisdom and faithfulness to an end above and contrary to its nature. This very rod was sent in love to the soul. Perhaps we were living at ease, or in heartless backsliding. The awakening voice called us to our Bible and to prayer. Thus eyeing God in it, we see it to be love, not wrath; receiving, not casting out. We might perhaps have wished it a little altered; that the weight had been shifted, and the cross a little smoothed, where it pressed upon the shoulder. But now that our views are cleared, we discern blessing enough to swallow up the most poignant smart. We see the "needs-be," for our preservation from imminent danger (cp. Pro 1:32; Psa 55:19), and for "the trial of our faith" (1Pe 1:7). We come to an unhesitating verdict in favor of the absolute perfection of the dispensation (Psa 51:4; 119:75). Faith understands the reasons of the discipline (1Pe 1:6, 7); acknowledges it as a part of His gracious providence (Deu 8:2, 15, 16), and the provision of His everlasting covenant (Psa 89:30-32); waits to see the end of the Lord (Jam 5:11); and meanwhile draws its main support from the seal of adoption.

For indeed it is the declared test of our legitimacy (Heb 12:7, 8; Rev 3:19). He *corrects whom he loves, the son in whom he delighteth*. His discipline is that of the family, not of the school, much less of the prison. He corrects His children, not as criminals, but as

⁴² Pro 24:10. Isa 40:27-31. Cp. 1Sa 27:1; 1Ki 19:4; Job 3:1-3; Jer 20:14-18.

⁴³ **deprecated** – prayed against.

those whom He beholds without spot, “made accepted in the Beloved” (Eph 1:6). Nor is there caprice,⁴⁴ as too often with an earthly father in his chastisement (Heb 12:10). It is wisdom in the spirit of love. “He rejoiceth over his child to do him good” (Jer 32:41); yet as a wise and affectionate father, He would not suffer him to be ruined for want of *correction* (Pro 13:24; Deu 8:5). It is correction—this is for your humbling. It is only correction—this is your consolation. The intolerable sting of penal infliction is removed. Here then the child has rest indeed?⁴⁵ The rod is now meekly, yea, thankfully borne, because it is in the hand of One supreme in wisdom, as in love, who knows what is our need, and how to apply the discipline. He chooses the fittest time (Isa 30:18; 1Pe 5:6), the surest yet gentlest means, the most considerate measure (Isa 27:7, 8; Jer 30:11; Lam 3:31-33), the most effective instruments. And, comparing our affliction with our sin, is not the marvel that it is so light? (Ezr 9:13; Psa 103:10; Lam 3:39). Have we not more than deserved it all? “I love the rod of my heavenly Father,” exclaimed the saintly Fletcher, “How gentle are the stripes I feel! How heavy those I deserve!”⁴⁶ “O God, I have made an ill use of Thy mercies, if I have not learnt to be content with Thy *correction*.”⁴⁷

Should he then at any dark season ask, “If it be so, why am I thus?” (Gen 25:22); you are thus, because this is your Father’s training discipline for heaven.⁴⁸ He loves thee so well, that He will bestow all pains upon thee. He will melt thee in His furnace that He may stamp thee with His image (Isa 27:9, 48:10; Zec 13:9; Mal 3:3). He would make thee “partake of His holiness” (Heb 12:10), that thou mightest partake of His happiness. But unless thou enter into His mind, thou wilt, so far as thou canst, defeat His purpose and lose the benefit—a loss never to be told (cp. Jer 6:8). Look then well into the dispensation (Job 10:2; Psa 139:23, 24; Ecc 7:14; Lam 3:40). Every rod is thy Father’s messenger; and He will not bear to have His messenger *despised*. Be anxious to “hear the rod, and who hath appointed it” (Mic 6:9), well knowing that “the Lord hath not done without cause all that He hath done” (Eze 14:23). Be more concerned to have it sanctified than removed; yea, above all things deprecate its removal, until it has fully wrought its appointed work (Isa 4:4). We can but admire that considerate dispensation, which uses these “light afflictions” (2Co 4:17) as the means of deliverance from the most deadly evil. Should flesh and blood rebel; should the earthly tabernacle shake with “the blow of His hand” (Psa 39:10, as above); yet shalt thou bless Him throughout eternity, that even by this crushing discipline, He should accomplish His most merciful purpose.

Meanwhile, give Him unlimited confidence; and if some steps of the way are hid, wait and “see the end” (Job 23:8-10; Jam 5:11). Watch for the first whispers of His will, the first intimation of His Providence, the guidance of His eye (Psa 32:8, 9). Many a stroke will thus be saved to thy peace and quietness. This indeed is a golden opportunity, requiring for its

⁴⁴ **caprice** – sudden change of mind without apparent or adequate motive; whim.

⁴⁵ 1Sa 3:18; 2Sa 15:25; 16:10, 11; Psa 39:9; Job 1:21; Isa 39:8. Cp. Joh 18:11. The heathen philosopher has accurately drawn the line—“Chastisement is on the sufferer’s account. Vengeance is for the satisfaction of him that inflicts it”—Aristotle *de Rhetor* b. i. c. 10.

⁴⁶ *Life of Rev. H. Venn*, pp. 238, 584.

⁴⁷ Bishop Hall.

⁴⁸ Job 33:14-29; 36:8-10; Heb 12:7, 8, *as above*—the term refers to the education of children.

due improvement much study, prayer, and retirement. No communion is so close, so endearing, so fruitful, as with a *chastening* God. Never is Christ more precious to us, His love never more sweet, than in the midst—yea, in the very form, of *chastening*. Never have we so full a manifestation of the Divine character (Psa 119:75) and perfections. What we have before learnt in theory, we here learn experimentally; and what we have before imperfectly understood, is here more fully revealed.⁴⁹ With regard to the full weight and duration of the trial, and all its minute circumstances, successively so bitter and piercing, we may ask, “Which of them could be spared?” It is quite clear as to the whole time, the whole weight, the whole number and variety of circumstances, that all and each were as necessary as any part. Where could we have stopped, without making that stop fatal to the great end? What does it all mean, but the Lord holding to His determination to save us; all the thoughts of His heart, every exercise of His power, centering in this purpose of His sovereign mercy?

Chapter 3:35

The Inheritance of the Wise

The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the promotion of fools.

This is the last contrast drawn to restrain our envy at the prosperity of the wicked (Pro 3:31). It carries us forward to the coming day, when all shall “discern” in the full light of eternity (Mal 3:18). *The wise—the heirs of glory*, are identified with *the lowly* (Pro 3:34; 11:2)—the heirs of grace. Self-knowledge, the principle of lowliness, is the very substance of *wisdom*. Their inheritance also is one—grace and *glory* (Psa 84:11). For what higher *glory* can there be than the grace, which “hath redeemed” a vile worm of the earth, “and made him a king and priest unto God” (Rev 5:9, 10)? Oh! Let the redeemed cherish honorable thoughts of their present *glory*. Be careful to clear it from the defilement and degradation of the world’s dust, and enjoy it in adoring praise to Him, who hath chosen thee to this so undeserved grace (Rev 1:5, 6).

⁴⁹ Job 42:5. Compare the Apostle’s most instructive and encouraging exposition, Hebrews 12. There is some slight variation between Hebrews 12:6, and verse 12. The one describes the mode and subject of the chastening. The other shows the Father’s delight in His chastened child. Some by inverting the first clause, verse 12, grossly pervert the meaning, and conclude themselves to be the Lord’s children, because they are afflicted. But though every child is corrected, not everyone that is corrected is a child. The same hand—but not the same character—gives the stroke, to the godly and the ungodly. The scourge of the Judge is widely different from the rod of the Father. Cp. 1Sa 28:15-20 with 2Sa 12:13, 14; Pro 1:26; Isa 1:24 with Jer 31:18-20; Hos 11:7, 8; also Isa 27:7-9. Nor is it chastening, but the endurance of chastening, according to the rules prescribed, that seals our adoption, Heb 12:7.

But who can tell *the glory* of the after *inheritance*—not like this world’s glory, the shadow of a name; but real, solid, “an infinite gain, in the exchange of dross⁵⁰ for down-weight of pure gold.”⁵¹ All occasion of sin and temptation is shut out forever. “The tree of knowledge shall be without enclosure. There shall be neither lust, nor forbidden fruit; no withholding of desirable knowledge, nor affectation of undesirable. The glorified spirits touch nothing that can defile, and defile nothing they touch.”⁵² But after all, the glory of this glory will be communion and likeness with our Lord—“to be with him,” “to behold His glory” (Joh 17:24; 1Jo 3:2). We need not pry too minutely. Thus much is clear. The value of our inheritance is beyond all price; its happiness unspeakable; its security unchangeable; its duration eternity. *The wise shall inherit glory*. “They that be *wise* shall shine as the brightness of the firmament for ever and ever” (Dan 12:3; Mat 13:43).

Oh! Will not the fools then discover the vanity of this world’s glory, too late to make a wise choice? *Shame* is their present fruit (Pro 13:18; 10:9). Honor even now sits unseemly upon them (Pro 26:1). But “what fruit will eternity bring” of those things, whereof they will then “be ashamed” (Rom 6:21)? Truly *shame will be their promotion*. Their fame will be infamous, their disgrace conspicuous; lifting them up, like Haman upon his elevated gallows (Est 7:9), a gazing-stock to the world. How solemn and complete will be the great separation for eternity! “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to *shame* and everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2).

Chapter 4:14-17 – Avoid Temptation

Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. For they sleep not, except they have done mischief: and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall. For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence.

How often does fellowship with *the wicked* loosen the fast hold of instruction! Their *path* is so contrary to the way of instruction, that the very *entrance* into it is forsaking the way of God. Their character is here drawn in their father’s image: first sinners, then tempters. *Mischief* is their meat and drink (Job 15:16; Psa 14:4). “To do evil is more proper and natural than to sleep, eat, or drink.”⁵³ With *sleepless* eagerness do they pursue their work (Job 24:15, 16; Psa 36:4; Mic 2:1), caring little for any lengths of *violence*, so that *they do mischief, or cause some to fall* (Pro 1:10-14, 16; 2:14; 24:2; Psa 10:8; 2Pe 2:14). Judas with his midnight torches (Joh 18:3); the early morning assemblage of the Jewish rulers (Luk 22:66);

⁵⁰ **dross** – worthless matter from metals which is thrown off in the process of melting.

⁵¹ Leighton on 1Pe 5:10.

⁵² John Howe’s *The Blessedness of the Righteous*. Pro 5:11.

⁵³ Reformers’ Notes.

the frenzied vow of the enemies of Paul (Acts 23:12); and many a plot in after ages against the Church—all vividly portray this unwearied wickedness.

Yet if we be preserved from this undisguised malignity, what are all the allurements for every rank and circumstance of life, but the more subtle poison of the murderer? A light-minded young person pours into his companion's ear—simple and inexperienced in the ways of sin—perhaps filthy conversation; or presents before him images of lasciviousness.⁵⁴ What but a rooted principle of grace can save his unsuspecting victim? Or again, the venomous infidel, intent upon “spoiling” (Col 2:8) his fellow-creature of his most precious treasure, drops into his bosom the repetition of the first lie (Gen 3:4). No principle appears to be given up, no fundamental doctrine denied; yet the foundation of an unwavering confidence is shaken to pieces. And is not this *mischief* and *violence*, as the murderer's stab?

Surely then it is mercy, that forbids needless intercourse⁵⁵ with the *evil man* (Eph 5:11). With a constitution prone to evil, when the alternative is, whether we shall shun or dare the danger, can we doubt our path? The whole Scripture is on the side of caution, to hazard nothing, except on a plain call of Providence. “Because we are free, we may not run wild.”⁵⁶ Half our virtue we owe to being out of the way of temptation. Observe how the wise man heaps up his words: *Enter not into the path*—no, not so much as set thy foot into it. If some accident throws thee into it, *go not* on in it; *avoid it* with detestation.⁵⁷ *Pass not by it*, lest thou shouldst unwittingly turn in (Pro 5:8). Not only *avoid it* when near, but avoid nearness to it. It is like living in the atmosphere of contagion,⁵⁸ in the midst of virulent and fatal disease. The earnest repetition of the warning shows at once the imminence of the danger, and the certainty of the injury. The world around us is the action of mind upon mind. We are continually, through the medium of intercourse, molding ourselves by other minds, and other minds by our own. Intercourse with the ungodly must, therefore, be fraught with fatal contamination (1Co 15:33; Psa 106:35; Pro 22:24, 25). The occasions, the company, the borders of temptation—all must be *avoided* (Pro 9:10, 15; Gen 2:16, 17; 3:6).

Young people are apt to plead with those who have the charge of their best interests, “What harm is there in this or that path?” Apart from other evils, this is plain. It is a contagious atmosphere. You are drinking in poison. It is far more easy to shun the occasion of sin, than the sin when the occasion presents it; to resist the beginnings, than the progress, of sin. There must, therefore, be no tampering with it; no trial of strength, to see how far our resolutions will keep us. Let the examples of Lot (Gen 13:10-13; 14:12), Dinah (Gen 34:1, 2), Solomon (1Ki 11:1-5), Peter (Mat 26:58, 69-74), warn us how far only the *entrance into the path of the wicked* may carry us; lengths that we could never have contemplated in prospect without horror. It may appear an harmless outset. But how far on? The *entrance* is fatally connected with the next step onward. The frightful extent of the

⁵⁴ **lasciviousness** – wantonness; indulgence of sensual desires.

⁵⁵ **intercourse** – communication, commerce, connection.

⁵⁶ Bishop Joseph Hall's *Contemplations on the New Testament*, B. xv. 3.

⁵⁷ Edward Leigh's *Critica Sacra*. See Cartwright.

⁵⁸ **contagion** – disease carrying matter which is exhaled from a sick person.

probability of falling might make the boldest tremble. Those at least, that know their own corruption and weakness, will shrink back, where you tread lightly. Here and there, indeed, there may be some special miracle of preservation. But no one comes out of *the path* without hurt (2Ch 18:1-3; 19:2; 20:35-37); and the general issue is an open door to ruin.

To pretend to dread sin without fearing temptation, is self-delusion. Satan has too nearly allied them for us to separate them. The evil company is loved, then the evil of the company.⁵⁹ To pray not to be led into temptation; yet not to watch, that we enter not into it (Mat 6:13; 26:41)—is practically to contradict our prayers; to mock our God, by asking for what we do not heartily wish. “Walk then with God and with His people, separate from an ungodly world” (Pro 9:6; 2Co 6:17). Yet do not presume upon safety, even in separation from the ungodly. The whole tempting world may be presented to your imagination. The unsearchable deceitfulness of the heart may bear fearfully upon you. The tempter may in solitude, as with our Lord, put forth his special power (Mat 4:1). Walk closely with God in secret, and He will spread His almighty covering over you for your security. *Avoid* fellowship with them, who hinder your fellowship with God (Psa 119:63, 114, 115; also 17:4; 26:4, 5).

Chapter 4:19 – Spiritual Darkness

The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble.

The contrast [in the prior verse] is more clearly repeated.⁶⁰ Each has his own way. “The path of the just” is glowing light and joy (Pro 4:18). *The way of the wicked is darkness*, without direction, comfort, safety, or peace, till “his feet at last stumble on the dark mountains,” till he falls into “the blackness of darkness for ever” (Jer 13:16; Jud 13; cp. Job 18:5, 6, 18). His *way* is not only dark, but *as darkness*, a compound of ignorance, error, sin, and misery. The love of sin “rebels against the light” (Job 24:13; Joh 3:19; cp. Isa 5:20). The *darkness* is willful, and therefore accountable. There is no *stumbling in the path of the just*. So far as he is upright, the Lord keeps him (Pro 4:12; 3:23; Psa 91:11, 12). *The wicked* go on, “groping on as if they had no eyes” (Isa 59:10); hurrying on blindly into misery that they can neither foresee nor avoid (Job 5:14; 12:25; Jer 23:12; Zep 1:17). *They know not at what they stumble*. Oh! if they did, would they not startle and shrink back? For *they stumble* on the very foundation of the Gospel! Making the rock of salvation a rock of of-

⁵⁹ Eusebius mentions a young man, whom St. John committed to the special charge of the Bishop of Ephesus; but who by evil company was drawn away to be a captain of robbers, until St. John went after him and brought him back, B. iii. c. 20. Augustine’s recollections of his youthful theft was, “By myself alone I would not have done it. It was the company that I loved, with whom I did it.” He adds, when they said, “Come, let us go and do it, I was ashamed not to be as shameless as they”—*Confessions*, Lib. ii. 8, 9.

⁶⁰ Pro 4:18. See the same contrast drawn by our Lord, Mat 6:22, 23. Schultens considers the original to express *increasing darkness*, answering to the *increasing light* of the opposite path. Cp. Job 15:23.

fence (Rom 9:32, 33; 1Pe 2:8). Would they but listen to the merciful warning of their Lord—“Yet a little time the light is with you: walk while ye have the light, lest *darkness* come upon you; for he that walketh in *darkness knoweth not* whither he goeth” (Joh 12:35, 36).

Chapter 6:16-19

Seven Things the Lord Hates

These six things doth the Lord hate; yea, seven are an abomination unto him:
[margin: of his soul] *A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.*

Man conceives of God in his heart as “such a one as himself” (Psa 50:21), looking with indifference at sin. Here therefore Solomon names *six, yea, seven* (cp. Pro 30:15-18) *abominations* (most of them mentioned in the preceding list) *which the Lord hateth—a proud look,*⁶¹ *a lying tongue,*⁶² *a blood-stained hand.*⁶³ And, lest we should think that He “looketh only on the outward appearance” (1Sa 16:7), *the heart*, active in *devising wickedness,*⁶⁴ is brought out; and its ready organ, *the feet swift in running to mischief* (Pro 1:16; Isa 59:7; Rom 3:15). How *hateful* also is the *false witness* (Zec 8:17), surely reserved by Him for judgment! (Pro 19:5; Zec 5:4; Mal 3:5). Let the self-willed separatist remember the double stamp (Pro 6:14, 19) upon him *that soweth discord among brethren*. If the heavenly “dew descends upon the brethren that dwell together in unity” (Psa 133), a withering blast will fall on those who, mistaking prejudice for principle, “cause divisions” for their own selfish ends (Rom 16:17, 18). Fearful is the Lord’s mark upon them: “sensual, having not the Spirit.”⁶⁵ If we cannot attain unity of opinion, “*perfectly* joined together in the same

⁶¹ Pro 8:13; 30:13; Psa 18:27; Isa 2:12; Jer 50:31. See also the examples of Pharaoh—Exo 9:16; Haman—Est 7:10; Nebuchadnezzar—Dan 4:28-33; Herod—Act 12:21-23.

⁶² Pro 12:22; Psa 5:6; Rev 21:8. Gehazi—2Ki 5:25-27. Ananias and Sapphira—Act 5:1-10.

⁶³ Gen 9:6. Cain—4:8-12. Manasseh—2Ki 21:15, 16. Specially the murderers of his dear Son—Mat 23:31-38.

⁶⁴ Ahithophel – 2Sa 16:20-23; 17:23; Mic 2:1; 2Pe 2:14.

⁶⁵ Jud 19; 1Co 3:3, 4. Let the wisdom of experience given by an accurate observer of himself and the Church, be seriously pondered—“I am much more sensible of the evil of schism, separating humor, gathering parties, and making several sects in the Church, than I was heretofore. For the effects have shown us more of the mischiefs. I am much more sensible, how prone many young professors are to spiritual pride, self-conceitedness, unruliness, and division, and so prove [to be] the grief of their teachers, and firebrands in the Church. I am much more sensible than heretofore of the breadth, length, and depth of the radical, universal, odious sin of selfishness, and the excellency and necessity of self-denial...and of loving our neighbor as ourselves”—Richard Baxter’s *Narrative of the Most Memorable Passages of His Life and Times*.

mind, and in the same judgment” (1Co 1:10); at least let us cultivate unity of spirit—“Whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule; let us mind the same thing” (Phi 3:16).

Chapter 8:17 – Seek Him Early

I love them that love me, and those that seek me early shall find me.

Now behold the grace of this Divine Person to His *loving* children. None by nature are interested in it (Rom 8:7). But His free grace first implants *love* in their hearts, and then cheers them with the assurance of His own *love* (1Jo 4:19; Joh 14:21). The first kindling of the flame is of Him. We *love*, because we are drawn (Jer 31:3). We *seek*, not by the impulse from within, but by the grace from above (Pro 16:1; Psa 119:32); and *seeking*, we *find* (Isa 45:19; Jer 29:13; Mat 7:7, 8). But it must be *early seeking*—the first desire and choice of the heart (Pro 23:6; Psa 63:1; Hos 5:15; Mat 6:33). It must be *early* in the day (Psa 5:3, 119:147; Isa 26:9; Mar 1:35), the firstfruits of our time. Consecrate the whole to Him. Take care that God is the first person we speak to; that we see His face first before any other; else will our lamp be untrimmed, our soul estranged from His presence, our heart unready for His service. Let it be the *early* breaking in of the day of grace (Job 8:5-7; Isa 55:6; 2Co 6:2), the improvement of the first—who knows that they be not the only—opportunities of salvation. (Pro 27:1; Heb 4:7). Every present opportunity for the soul is worth worlds. Mercy is in it; grace and glory are in it; heaven and eternity are in it. But remember, the door of grace that is opened today, may be shut tomorrow—for ever.

Again, this *early seeking*. Oh! Let it be the early spring and morning of life (1Ki 18:12; 2Ch 34:3), when the eye is full of life, and the heart of gladness. Let it be “the kindness of youth” (Jer 2:2), “the first love”—before it has been devoted to the world, before the hardening habits of sin have been formed and fixed. Is He not the greatest, the most desirable, the most satisfying, good? Therefore, let Him be to us—as He deserves to be—the first of the first, the best of the best.

Children! Here is a special encouragement for you, added to the general one. It can never be too early for you. Even now it is too late. God has claimed you from the moment that you passed from unconscious infancy to the dignity of a responsible being. The time spent, so long estranged from God, has been all too long. Early devotedness saves from many follies and mistakes, retracing of steps, and the after misery of being “made to possess the iniquities of our youth” (Job 13:26). Early satisfaction—the pure fruit of *early seeking* (for they that thus *seek shall find*)—will be the joy of your whole life (Psa 90:14; Pro 6:34, 35), the dawn of your blessed eternity. Remember, the bud and bloom of life is specially acceptable to God (Hos 11:1-4), specially honored by Him (1Sa 2:18; 3:19; Psa 92:12-15). But is it reasonable—nay, is it not a most abasing thought—to offer the flower of youth to Satan; and, when you have well worn yourself out in his service, to

reserve only the dregs⁶⁶ and sweepings of life for your Savior (Mal 1:8)? Every day you lose a world of happiness; you bind a chain of sin; you take a step to hell. Come, then, and answer the call that is drawing you to Him who is worthy of all (1Sa 3:9; Psa 32:8; Jer 3:4). Never will you regret that you have come too soon. But many have been the sorrowing cries: Lord, “I have loved thee too late!” (Mat 25:6-12; Luk 13:24, 25). Come then, by His help, and in dependence on His grace, make Him your first, your present choice. Lay claim by faith to this promise to *early seekers*, and you *shall find*.

Chapter 10:17 – Heed Instruction

He is in the way of life that keepeth instruction: but he that refuseth reproof erreth.

Mercy unspeakable is it, that *the way of life* is opened! *Instruction* sets the way before us. *He that keepeth instruction* cannot fail of finding and enjoying it (Pro 8:34, 35). The more we value that most mindful part of *instruction*, discipline (Pro 6:23; 22:17), the more shall we regard every practical lesson in the heavenly school. To *refuse the reproof*, to be deaf to the voice that would save us from ruin, is a most fearful *error*—the proof of a foolish and unhumiliated heart (Pro 12:1; 2Ch 16:7-10; 25:15, 16); the certain forerunner, if not corrected, of irremediable⁶⁷ destruction (Pro 1:25, 26, 30; 5:12; 15:10; 29:1; Jer 6:10; Zep 3:2). Child of God! Is it not matter of shame and sorrow that you should be so slow to *keep* such inestimable *instruction*; so prone to *err* from the *way of life*; and, though having the full promise of Divine guidance, still so often acting as the slave of your own will?

Chapter 10:30 The Righteous and the Wicked

The righteous shall never be removed: but the wicked shall not inhabit the earth.

The frailty of our present condition, common to all (Ecc 9:2, 11), was not in the wise man’s eye; but the state of the two classes as in the purpose and mind of God. His way is strength to the upright. *The righteous*, walking steadily in the way, *shall never be removed* (Psa 15; 37:22; 112:6; 125:1; 2Pe 1:5-11). “They enjoy in this life by faith and hope their everlasting life.”⁶⁸ “No weapon that is formed against them shall prosper. The mountains shall depart, and the little hills shall be *removed*: but my loving-kindness shall not de-

⁶⁶ **dregs** – the basest or least desirable portion.

⁶⁷ **irremediable** – that which cannot be corrected or remedied.

⁶⁸ Reformers’ Notes.

part from thee; neither shall the covenant of my peace *be removed*; saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee” (Isa 54:10). Is not this a confidence that earth nor hell can never shake (Rom 8:38, 39)?

The wicked—have they any such confidence? So far from being *never removed*, they shall *never inhabit!* They have no title, like *the righteous* (Mat 5:5; 1Co 3:22), as sons and heirs, to the blessings of *earth*; no hope or interest in the land, of which the earth is the type (Psa 37:29). Often are they cut off from inhabiting the one (Pro 10:27; 2:22; Psa 37:22; Eze 33:24-26). Never will they be suffered to *inhabit* the other (1Co 6:9; Rev 21:27). As our character is, so is our hope and prospect. We gain or lose both worlds.

Chapter 11:18, 19 – Deceitfulness

The wicked worketh a deceitful work: but to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward. As righteousness tendeth to life; so he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death.

Both the Masters that claim the heart put forth their promise of *reward*. Did Satan fulfill all his promises, truly his servants would be abundantly enriched (Gen 3:4, 5; Mat 4:8, 9). But *the wicked worketh a deceitful work*, ending in disappointment (Heb 2:13; Rom 6:21). Pharaoh’s exterminating project against Israel *deceived* him in its result, issuing in their increase, and the ruin of himself and his people (Act 7:19; Exo 1:20). Abimelech doubtless expected peace as the result of his murderous work (Jdg 9:22-57). But *he pursued it to his own death*. Ahab anticipated rest from the riddance of Naboth. But the words of his troublesome reprover were to him as the “piercings of a sword” (Pro 12:18). How little did Gehazi contemplate the plague of the leprosy, as the issue of his well-contrived plan (2Ki 5:27). Were the temptation presented in a naked form—“For this pleasure sell thy soul, thy God, thy heaven”—who would not fly with horror from the most enticing bait? But the tempter *worketh a deceitful work*, painting the present pleasure, and hiding the certain reality of ruin (Pro 1:15-18). Oh! It is affecting to see his poor victim eagerly *pursuing evil* (Pro 4:16, 17), yet *to his own death*. Not only his open acts, but his thoughts, motions, pursuits, ends—all *tend to death* (Pro 5:1-5; 9:18). God has no place in his heart. And what else can be the end of a life without God? Thus the religious professor⁶⁹ *deceives* others, perhaps himself. But his *deceitful work* will be the delusion of a moment, an eternity of confusion.

The sure reward of righteousness stands out in bright contrast. The “seed is precious,” and “the sheaves shall doubtless” follow (Psa 126:6). No sinner since the fall of man has ever known the full *reward* of righteousness even in this life. It may be given as an afflictive dispensation—grace to support under trouble, and to triumph in the issue of it. It will probably be given as the harvest to the sower, after trying and anxious waiting

⁶⁹ **religious professor** – one who claims to be religious, but is not a true believer.

(Jam 5:7, 8). But whenever vouchsafed⁷⁰ or however delayed, it is *a sure reward*. *Righteousness* is the seed; happiness is the harvest. *The reward* indeed is not from cause, but of consequence; not of debt, but of grace depending upon a free promise; mercifully yet *surely* linked with Christian perseverance (Ecc 11:6; Hos 10:12; 1Co 15:58; Gal 6:7, 8). It must however be true *righteousness*—not according to man’s profession, but according to the Divine standard. A routine of duties may skirt the borders of religion, at the utmost distance from the Spirit of God, and equally remote from the vital principle of the heart. But *righteousness* not only “delivereth from death” (Pro 11:4) (a special mercy even with the loss of all) (Gen 19:16; Jer 45:5), but it *tendeth to life* (Pro 10:16; Isa 3:10; Rom 2:7; Gal 6:8); full of living enjoyment, of infinite, eternal pleasure. What importance then attaches to every godly principle! All have reference to eternity. If *righteousness* be our main end, God will make it our best friend; nor will He, as the world has done, reward us with ciphers⁷¹ instead of gold. Who will not love and serve Thee when “in keeping thy commandments there is a *sure reward*” (Psa 19:11; 37:3-6; Isa 32:17)? Irresistible will be the conviction of *the wicked* at the last: “Had I but *sown righteousness* in the service of God, it would have been infinitely happy for me for eternity!” But inconceivably joyous will be the great consummation to the righteous: “Behold, I come quickly, and my *reward* is with me to give every man as according as his work shall be” (Rev 22:12).

Chapter 12:15 – The Fool

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.

The fool’s conceit hinders his wisdom (Job 11:12)—a discouraging case (Pro 26:12)! *His way is right in his own eyes* (Pro 16:2). He needs no direction, asks no *counsel*, is stubborn in his own way—because it is his own (Jdg 2:19), and follows it to his own ruin. His chief danger is his security (Deu 29:19). There may be no flagrant sin, nothing that degrades him below the level of his respectable neighbor. He has no doubt of heaven. Instead of the way being so narrow that few find it (Mat 7:14), in his view it is so easy of access that few miss it. Thus all his religion is self-delusion (Pro 14:12). O my God! Save me from myself, from my own self-deceitfulness.

What a proof of wisdom is a teachable spirit! What an excellent means of increasing it (Pro 1:5)! Was not Moses wiser for *hearkening to Jethro’s counsel* (Exo 18:14-24), and David for listening to the restraining advice of Abigail (1Sa 25:23-32)? How precious then to the child of God is the office of the Divine Counselor (Isa 9:6)! How wise the reverential faith

⁷⁰ **vouchsafed** – conferred or bestowed.

⁷¹ **cipher** – the arithmetic numeral 0; something of no value.

that *hearkens to His counsel!* Whom does He ever disappoint? Whom does He “upbraid”⁷² (Jam 1:5)?

Chapter 12:17 – Lying

He that speaketh truth sheweth forth righteousness: but a false witness deceit.

This proverb may appear almost too obvious to need remark. But the Scripture not only sets out what is deep and searching, but stamps the everyday truths with the seal of God for our more reverential obedience. Yet there is here more than lies on the surface. It might seem enough for a faithful witness to *speak truth*. But no, he must *shew forth righteousness*—what is just, as well as what is true. The best-intentioned purpose must not lead us to conceal what is necessary to bring the cause to a righteous issue; “rejoicing not in iniquity, but rejoicing in the truth” (1Co 13: 6).

A *false witness* does not always deal with open lying, but with *deceit*—truth misrepresented, concealed, and thus turned into falsehood. Thus was Doeg a *false witness* against the priests. He states the fact, but by suppression of circumstances gives a false impression (1Sa 21:1-7; 22:9, 10). The *false witness* condemned our Lord by a similar perverse misconstruction of His words (Mat 27:63; Joh 2:19-21). Oh, cherish a deep abhorrence of *deceit* in all its forms and beginnings (Pro 13:5; Psa 119:163)! Christian obligation and privilege alike forbid it (Eph 4:22, 25). *Truth* and *deceit* are not mere moral qualities, but the distinctive mark of the two classes of the world. Look to it, that the broad stamp of *truth* and *righteousness* brings out the testimony: “Behold! an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile” (Joh 1:47).

Chapter 12:24 – Slothfulness

The hand of the diligent shall bear rule: but the slothful shall be under tribute.

Diligence is the ordinary path to advancement. Pharaoh required men of activity for the charge of his cattle (Gen 47:6); Solomon for the administration of his kingdom (1Ki 11:28). This was Joseph’s road to *bearing rule* (Pro 22:29). But if it does not raise in the world, it will command influence in its own sphere. The faithful steward is made *ruler* over his Lord’s household (Mat 24:45-47). The active trader *bears rule* over many cities (Mat 25:21). Diligence therefore is not a moral virtue separate from religion, but rather a component part of it (Rom 12:11).

⁷² **upbraid** – to reprove sharply; to scold.

The *slothful* spirit brings a man under bondage. “He is perpetually needing counsel of others, and hanging upon it.”⁷³ In the grand concern he is the slave of his own lust; in the worst service, under the most degrading tyranny; “wicked” because “*slothful*,” and “cast out and condemned as an unprofitable servant” (Mat 25:26-30). Christian Professor! Tremble at this responsibility of doing nothing, of living for thine own indulgence; neglecting the great object of life—the only object that tells upon eternity.

Chapter 17:22

Merry Heart; Broken Spirit

A merry heart doeth good like a medicine; but a broken spirit drieth the bones.

This is not true of all *merriment*. The wise man justly describes the loud and noisy mirth of fools to be, no *medicine*, but “madness,”⁷⁴ a transient flash, not an abiding source of enjoyment. Probably this merriment here means nothing more than cheerfulness, which, in its proper measure, on proper subjects, and at a proper time, is a legitimate pleasure especially belonging to religion. Our Lord thus made *a merry heart* by His message of Divine forgiveness (Mat 9:2-7); and this doubtless was a more healing *medicine* to the paralytic than the restoration of his limbs. If I be a pardoned sinner, an accepted child of God, what earthly trouble can sink me? “And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them” (Act 16:25). The martyrs “glorified God in the fire.” They were “tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection” (Heb 11:35). All earthly enjoyments are now doubly blest with heavenly sunshine (Ecc 9:7-9).

There is also the Christian flow of natural spirits. For when consecrated to the Lord, they become a means of enjoyment, not only to ourselves (Pro 15:13), but to those around us. Often has the mourning saint been encouraged, often also has the worldling been convicted, by a brother’s cheerful words or looks.⁷⁵ To the former it has been a *medicine*; to the latter a lesson.

A *broken spirit* in an evangelical sense is God’s precious gift, stamped with His special honor, and always constituting an acceptable service. But here it describes a brooding spirit of despondency, always looking at the dark side; and, if connected with religion (which is not always the case), flowing from narrow and perverted views, a spurious⁷⁶ humility centering in self. The influence *drieth up the bones*. The bodily system is sensibly affected. “It contracts and enfeebles the animal spirits; preys on our strength; eats

⁷³ Dathe *in loco*. “The slothful shall become subservient to others”—French and Skinner’s *Translation of Proverbs*, with notes, 1831. Cp. Pro 10:4; 11:29.

⁷⁴ Ecc 2:2; cp. 1Sa 25:36, 37.

⁷⁵ Pro 12:25; Ecc 8:1.

⁷⁶ **spurious** – not true or genuine; counterfeit.

out the vigor of the constitution. The radical moisture is consumed; and the unhappy subject of this passion droops like a flower in the scorching heat of summer.”⁷⁷

Not less baneful⁷⁸ is its influence upon the spiritual system. Hard thoughts of God are induced, as if He had forsaken, neglected, or forgotten us. From doubting, the soul comes to chilling fear, thence to gloomy despondency. The power of the telescope fails in bringing distant objects nigh. Hence, the present hold of the grand object is feeble. The hope of future enjoyment is dark. Distance too often lessens communication. Prayer is less frequently or powerfully sent up. The answers therefore, and the supplies of cheering grace from this source, are more scanty. Thus, we are not only weakened in comfort, but cut short in strength. The mind is clothed in sable.⁷⁹ The chariot’s wheels are taken off, so that we drag heavily (Exo 14:28). Discontent, and a querulous⁸⁰ unbelieving sadness, take possession of the soul, and wholly unfit us for the service of God.

Most watchful therefore should we be against this withering influence. Allow not the imagination to dwell needlessly in gloom. Constitutional temperament will have its influence. External things act upon the body, and through the body upon the mind. We are some of us creatures even of weather, not the same on a misty as on a bright day. There is much in our physical economy rather within the province of the physician than the minister; much perhaps that we may be inclined too hastily to censure in a brother, when a more accurate knowledge would open our sympathy. When outward and inward troubles unite, what wonder if the vessel, like Paul’s ship “where two seas met” (Act 27:41), give way?⁸¹ Yet, let it be remembered, that every indulgence increases the evil; and that allowed prevalence may end in a fixed melancholy.

Turn and see what materials can be gathered for resistance to this ruinous evil, and for inducing a well-regulated cheerfulness. “Why am not I at this moment utterly overwhelmed with distress? How seldom, if ever, am I in pain all over at the same time! How faithfully do our greatest supports combine with our greatest trials” (2Co 1:5)! Surely, in these recollections some excitement of pleasurable feeling might be directed into the channel of gratitude to God! How many rays of collected mercy shine from the great center of joy!

But to come more immediately to the Gospel, unquestionably there is abundant matter for the deepest humiliation. No words can adequately describe the shame that we ought to feel for our insensibility, even on account of one single act of infinite love. Yet the Gospel encourages humiliation, not despondency. It deals in the realities, not of woe and despair, but of hope, peace, and joy. Its life and glory is He that “bindeth up the bro-

⁷⁷ Bp. Horne’s *Sermon on a Merry Heart*. Our English proverb is, “Dry sorrow drinks the blood”—sorrow that cannot weep!

⁷⁸ **baneful** – ruinous; harmful.

⁷⁹ **sable** – black clothing, as a symbol of mourning.

⁸⁰ **querulous** – complaining; grumbling.

⁸¹ Pro 12:25; 15:13; Job 30:30; Psa 32: 3, 4; 102:3-5; 119:83. Compare *Apocrypha Book of Ecclesiasticus* 30:22; 38:18. (The Apocrypha is sometimes quoted from as literature without advocating its inspiration.) Ovid’s beautiful lines, *Lib. i. ex Ponto*. This mixture of bodily and mental anguish formed the completeness of our Lord’s sufferings. Psa 22:15; 59:3.

ken-hearted” (Isa 61:1), who “will not break the bruised reed” (Isa 42:3), or crush under His feet “the prisoners of hope” (Zec 9:12).

If then, Christian, you believe the Gospel to be “glad tidings” (Luk 1:19; 8:1), shew that you believe it, by lighting up your face with a smile; not by “bowing down the head as a bulrush,” and as it were, “spreading sackcloth and ashes under you” (Isa 58:5). Shew that it is the daylight of your soul; that you really find its ways to be “pleasantness and peace” (Pro 3:17); that you believe their joys, not because you have read and heard of them, but because you have tasted them. If they are happy, be happy in them. “Lie not against the truth,” by suffering your countenance to induce the belief that religion is a habit of inveterate⁸² and incurable gloom. Joy is indeed a forbidden fruit to the ungodly (Hos 9:1). But let it be the adorning of thy profession.⁸³ It is a sin against thy God to be without it (Deu 28:47). The gloom of the servant reflects unjustly upon the Master, as if thou “knewest him, that he was an hard man” (Mat 25:24). Resist then all sorrow that suggests such dishonorable thoughts of Him. Disparage not his heavenly comfort by laying unduly to heart his counter-balancing afflictions. No cloud can cover you, but the “bow may be seen in the cloud” (Gen 9:13-16). And in all this world’s afflictions, one beam of His love might scatter all the clouds and fill the heart with “joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1Pe 1:8). “Let the Lord then be magnified, which hath pleasure,” not in the misery, but in “the prosperity of His servants” (Psa 35:27). He giveth liberty to be cheerful, and ground to be cheerful, and He will give thee an heart to be cheerful with animated gladness.

After all, however, let each be careful to cultivate a just and even balance. Liveliness needs a guard, lest it should degenerate into levity. Be much in secret with God. Cherish a solemn, reverential spirit before the throne of grace. Christian joy is a deeply serious thing. The froth and lightness that passes for it deserves not the name. The carnal element must be destroyed, to introduce the heaven-born principle that comes from God and maintains communion with Him.

Yet on the other a grave temperament must be resisted, lest it should sink into morbid depression. Gloom is not the portion, and ought not to stamp the character, of the children of God. It may often be a conflict with a man’s own self, either in body or mind. But yet a little while, and, instead of the *broken spirit which drieth up the bones*, our spirits will be so high that another body must be formed to contain them. Meanwhile Christian discipline on both sides will be the principle of enlarged happiness and steady consistency.

⁸² **inveterate** – long established; deep-rooted.

⁸³ Isa 52:1, 2; 60:1.

Chapter 20:6 – Self-Deceit

*Most men will proclaim [to] everyone his own goodness;
but a faithful man who can find?*

This shows us the heart's deceitfulness and pride. Hear a man's own estimate of himself, and we need no further proof of his want of self-knowledge (Pro 16:2). Even the ungodly *proclaims his own goodness*. "Jehu took no heed to walk in the way of the Lord." Still, said he, "Come, see my zeal for the Lord" (2Ki 10:16, 19-31). Absalom, while treason was at work within, "stole the hearts" of the people by his loud pretensions to *goodness* (2Sa 15:1-6). The whole nation, while given up to all manner of iniquity, boasted of its integrity (Jer 2:23, 35; cp. Rom 2:17-23). The Pharisee *proclaimed his goodness* at the corner of the streets (Mat 6:1, 2, 5, 16; 23:5; cp. Pro 27:2), yea, even in the presence of his God (Luk 18:11-12). Such is the blindness of a self-deceiving heart! Oh Lord, teach me to remember, "That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God" (Luk 16:15).

After all, however, does not this glass, honestly used, exhibit more resemblance to our own features than we readily admit? We all condemn the open boasting of the Pharisee. But too often we eagerly catch at the good opinion of the world. Contrivance is made to gain a shadowy prize! A seeming backwardness is only in order that others may bring us forward.⁸⁴ Care is taken that it be known that *we* were the authors, or at least, that we had a considerable part in some work, that might raise our name in the Church. Sometimes we are too ready to take a degree of credit to ourselves which we do not honestly deserve, while we shrink from real reproach and obloquy⁸⁵ for the Gospel's sake.

In opposition to this self-complacent *goodness*, Solomon, an accurate observer of human nature, exclaims almost in despondency, *A faithful man*—as a parent, a reprover, an adviser, one "without guile"—*who can find* (Mic 7:1, 2)? Look close; view thyself in the glass of the Word (Psa 101:6). Does thy neighbor or thy friend find thee *faithful* to him? What does our daily intercourse witness? Is not the attempt to speak what is agreeable often made at the expense of truth? Are not professions of regard sometimes utterly inconsistent with our real feelings? In common life, where gross violations are restrained, a thousand petty offences are allowed that break down the wall between sin and duty, and, judged by the Divine standard, are indeed guilty steps upon forbidden ground. Never let it be forgotten that the sound influence of the social virtues can only be maintained by the graces of the Gospel. Never let the Christian professor deem moral integrity to be a low attainment. The man of God bursts forth into fervent praise for [God's provision of] upholding grace in his path (Psa 41:11, 12). For indeed, what can bring greater honor to God, than the proof manifested in the conduct of His people, that their daily transactions are animated with the soul of integrity, that their word is unchangea-

⁸⁴ **backwardness** – unwillingness, reluctance; **forward** – to the front.

⁸⁵ **obloquy** – censorious speech, reproachful language.

ble? Never does godliness shine more brightly than in “shewing all good fidelity” in all things (Tit 2:10).

Chapter 26:4, 5 – Wise Answers

*Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.
Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.*

We are forbidden and yet commanded to *answer a fool*. One rule decides to *answer him not*, the other to *answer him*. However, the reason attached to each rule explains the apparent contradiction. Both together are a wise directory for the treatment of the fool, according to the difference of character, time, or circumstances. Suppose [for example:] a free-thinker or scoffer at religion, showing the desperate “*folly* of his heart by making a mock at sin” (Pro 14:9), by witty and profane jestings, or specious arguments against the Word and ways of God. Generally speaking, [in this situation] it would be better to follow Hezekiah’s command concerning Rabshakeh’s blasphemy, “*Answer him not*” (2Ki 18:36, Jude 9). Jeremiah thus turned away in silence from the folly of the false prophets (Jer 28:11). If, however, we are constrained to reply, answer him not *according to his folly*, not in his own foolish manner, “not rendering railing for railing” (1Pe 3:9). Moses offended here: he answered the rebels *according to their folly*, passion for passion, and thus he became *like unto them* (Num 20:2-10). David’s answer to Nabal was in the same humiliating spirit (1Sa 25:21, 22). The *answerer* in this case is like the fool. He appears at the time to be cast in the same mold!

But what may be at one time our duty to restrain, at another time, and under different circumstances, it may be no less our duty to do. Silence may sometimes be mistaken for defeat. Unanswered words may be deemed unanswerable, and *the fool* become arrogant, more and more *wise in his own conceit* (Pro 26:12; Job 11:2). An answer therefore may be called for; yet not in folly, but to folly; “not in his foolish manner, but in the manner which his foolishness required;”⁸⁶ not *according to his folly*, but according to your own wisdom. Yet here our words should be sharp as rods. The fool’s back needs them. Such was Job’s answer to his wife: grave, convincing, silencing—“Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What! shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:9, 10).

Oh! for wisdom to govern the tongue, to discover “the time to keep silence, and the time to speak” (Ecc 3:7); most of all to suggest the “word fitly spoken” (Pro 15:23; 25:11) for effective reproof.

⁸⁶ Fuller’s *Harmony of Scripture*.

Chapter 28:13 – Confession

He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.

God and man each *cover sin*; God, in free unbounded grace (Psa 85:2); man, in shame and hypocrisy. The sinners here contrasted are chargeable with the same guilt. But how opposite are the remedies adopted and their several results! The contrast is not between great sins and small, but between *sins covered*, and *sins confessed and forsaken*. *Whoso covereth* the smallest *sin shall not prosper*. *Whoso confesseth and forsaketh* the greatest *shall find mercy*. “Love *covereth*” our neighbor’s sins (Pro 10:12); pride, our own. The proud sinner naturally wishes to be thought better than he is. His sin must have some *cover*.⁸⁷ He must at least give it a good name (Isa 5:20). He would *cover* it, if possible, from himself; putting it out of mind; banishing all serious thoughts; stifling conviction; and then trying to persuade himself that he is happy. To escape evil consequences, a lie is resorted to.⁸⁸ Or if the facts are too plain to be denied, [he may say,] “The worst part is unfounded. We were not in it so much as our neighbor.” Ignorance, good—or at least not bad—intentions, custom, necessity, strong temptation, sudden surprisal, the first offence; constitutional infirmity; even the decrees of God⁸⁹—one or more are pleaded in palliation.⁹⁰ Or to save our honor—rather our pride—the blame must be shifted on another.⁹¹ Even God Himself is made accountable—a secret but daring charge, carrying with it its own self-contradiction! Indignantly He challenges the proof, and lays the sin at the right door (Isa 50:1; Jam 1:13). More commonly, but most wrongfully, it is laid upon Satan. The most of his power is that he is a tempter. And no claim could he have ever established, had not we willingly sold ourselves to his service. Our father Adam, again, must bear the burden. Must our “teeth be set on edge” for the “sour grapes which he ate” (Eze 18:2)? Must the unborn children be held responsible for the inheritance, which their father lost? But it was the nature that sinned, of which we are a component part. We “were in his loins” (Heb 7:10) at the time, and therefore we share his responsibility. Our own personal sin has ratified the deed by our own free and repeated consent. All these attempted transfers are vain coverings. Conscience bears witness to the truth that no man takes harm but from himself.

⁸⁷ Cicero stamps confession of wickedness as disgraceful and dangerous (*turpis et periculosa*, *Cont. Verrem*, Lib. iii). Thus does Heathen morality develop the pride of the depraved nature.

⁸⁸ Cain, Gen 4:9; Rachel, Gen 31:34, 35; Joseph’s brethren, Gen 37:31-35; David, 2Sa 11:15, 25; the adulteress, Pro 30:20. Cp. Jer 2:23; Peter, Mat 26:70; Ananias and Sapphira, Act 5:1-8. Is not this a sad propensity in children? The first offence may be trifling. But the fear of punishment induces a lie. Another lie is necessary to *cover* the first. Every step adds to sin.

⁸⁹ Jer 7:10. Compare Calvin’s *Institute of the Christian Religions*, b. iii. c. xxiii. § 12-14.

⁹⁰ **palliation** – attempt to alleviate an offense by excuses or favorable representation.

⁹¹ Adam and Eve, Gen 3:12, 13. Cp. Job 31:33. Aaron, Exo 32:21-24; Saul, 1Sa 15:20, 21; Pilate, Mat 27:24-26.

But even this admitted, man with ceaseless ingenuity still attempts to frame a *cover for his sin*. Some supposed good deeds are put forth as a compensation (Mic 6:6, 7). And by balancing good and evil respectively against each other, he hopes to establish some preponderance in his favor. Yet all these fig-leaf coverings for his nakedness (Gen 3:7) only shew his determination to hold his sin; and his pride of heart, which would rather hide it from God himself, than to submit to receive free *mercy* as a self-condemned sinner.

These attempts however to *cover sin shall not prosper*. The voice of an offended God summoned Adam from his hiding-place to receive his sentence (Gen 3:9). “The voice of Abel’s blood cried from the ground,” and the murderer became “a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth” (Gen 4:10-12). Conscience lashed Joseph’s brethren with the sin of bygone days (Gen 42:21). Saul’s *covering his sin* cost him his kingdom (1Sa 15:21, 23). “The leprosy of Naaman clave to Gehazi and his seed for ever” (2Ki 5:27) The proud accusers of their fellow-sinner were “convicted by their own conscience” (Joh 8:9). “There is no darkness, nor shadow of death, where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves” (Job 34:22). Their darkest deed is wrought in the open face of an all-seeing God, and “set in the light of His countenance” (Job 34:21; Psa 90:8), to “be proclaimed upon the house-tops” before the assembled world (Luk 12:2, 3; Ecc 12:14; 1Co 4:5).

This unsuccessful attempt to *cover sin*, while it adds to the guilt (Isa 30:1), is fraught with misery (Isa 28:20). The love of sin struggles with the power of conscience. The door of access to God is barred (Psa 66:18). Christian confidence is clouded (Psa 32:3, 4); and, unless Sovereign mercy interpose, it must end in the sting of “the never-dying worm” (Isa 66:24; Mar 9:44-48). The *covering* of the disease precludes the possibility of the cure. Only the penitent *confessor* can be the pardoned sinner.

Long indeed is the struggle, ere every false *cover* is cut off; ere the heartless general confession—“We are all sinners”—is exchanged for the deep-felt personal acknowledgment, giving glory to God: “Thus and thus have I done. Behold, I am vile. What shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth” (Jos 7:19, 20; Job 40:4). But glorious is the divine victory over pride and sullenness, when this first act of repentance, this first step of return (Luk 15:17, 18), is heartily accomplished. God needs not confession for His own information. But He demands it for our good. It brings no claim on His mercy. But it is a *meetness*⁹² for the reception of it. Christ has fully satisfied the claims of justice. But the claims must be acknowledged in the humble acceptance of the benefit. The mercy is ready; but the sinner must sue it out—“Only acknowledge thine iniquity” (Jer 3:13). Our yearning Father is “waiting” for this moment, “that He may be gracious” (Luk 15:20; Hos 5:15). There is no further keeping of anger. He *shall have mercy*, instant reconciliation.⁹³ Words may be few, while the heart is full. With David it was but a single sentence; but the closet workings of his heart witnessed to the enlargement and ingenuousness⁹⁴

⁹² **meetness** – suitability, conformity.

⁹³ Psa 32:5. Compare similar examples, 2Ch 33:12, 13; Jer 31:18-20; Jon 3:5-10; Luk 15:21-24; 23:40-43. See also the promises: Lev 26:40-42; 2Ch 7:14; Job 33:27, 28; Isa 1:16-18; 55:7; Eze 18:21, 22; 1Jo 1:9.

⁹⁴ **ingenuousness** – sincerity.

of his sorrow.⁹⁵ Thus man *confesses* the debt; God crosses it out from His book; and sweet is the penitent's song—"Blessed is he, whose *sin is covered*" (Psa 32:1). The dying thief *confesses*, and the condemned malefactor is crowned with life eternal (Luk 23:43).

But we must not overlook the distinctive feature of this *confession*. It is not that of Pharaoh, extorted on the rack (Exo 9:27, 34); or of Saul and Judas (2Sa 24:16, 17; Mat 27:4, 5), the stinging of remorse; or of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mat 22:16), mere formal profession; or of the harlot (Pro 7:14), a cover for sin. Penitent faith *confesses* in the act of laying the hand upon the great sacrifice (Lev 16:21), and hence draws strength of purpose to *forsake* all that has been here *confessed*. For while the hypocrite *confesses* without *forsaking*,⁹⁶ the hearty *forsaking* is here the best proof of the sincere *confessing*.

And this first act of the penitent is matured into the daily habit of the saint. The further we advance, the deeper will be the tone of *confession* (Job 40:4; 42:6; Eze 16:63). The moment sin is seen to be sin, let it be laid on the Surety's⁹⁷ Head. Every moment of unconfessed sin adds to its burden and guilt. The thought of a nature estranged from God, a heart full of corruption; sins of youth and age, before and after conversion; against light and conviction, knowledge and love; the sins of our very confessions, their defilement, coldness, and too often self-righteous tendency—all supply abundant material for abasing acknowledgment. Plead the greatness, not the smallness of our sin.⁹⁸ Never deem any sin so trifling, as not to need the *immediate* application of the blood of atonement. Genuine conviction gives no rest, until by the believing apprehension of this remedy the peace of God is firmly fixed in the conscience. As Bunyan⁹⁹ so accurately pictured—not at the wicket-gate, but at the sign of the cross, did the Christian find the grave of sin. Here it is lost, forgotten, never found (Jer 50:20).

This evangelical humiliation lays the only solid ground for practical godliness. It is a sorrow full of joy and not less full of holiness. No Achan will be reserved (Jos 7:1); no Agag spared (1Sa 15:20); no right hand or right eye favored (Mar 6:17-20; 9:43-48). It will not be "the unclean spirit going out, and returning to his house with sevenfold influence" (Mar 12:43, 44); or the man, who leaves his home, but *forsakes* it not, all his heart and joy being still there. Here the *forsaking* will be without the thought of returning; yea, with the fixed determination never to return (Job 34:32). It will not be the exchange of one path in the broad road for another more attractive; but the relinquishment of the whole road with all its bypaths. The inner principles as well as the outer walk; "the unrighteous thoughts," no less than "the wicked ways" will be *forsaken* heartily and forever (Isa 55:7).



⁹⁵ 2Sa 12:13 with Psa 51. See also his tender dread of *covering sin*: Psa 139:1, 23, 24.

⁹⁶ Pharaoh and Saul, *as above*.

⁹⁷ **Surety** – one who undertakes to be responsible for another, especially one who assumes responsibilities or debts of another; hence, spoken of Christ, Heb 7:22.

⁹⁸ Psa 25:11 with Luk 18:11. Cp. Isa 43:24-26.

⁹⁹ John Bunyan (1628-1688): author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the classic allegorical book in which the main character, Christian, begins seeking after God to forgive his guilty burden of sin by entering through a narrow gate, and finds the burden completely removed when he comes to the Cross.

Bridge's *Proverbs* is "The best work on the Proverbs. While explaining the passage in hand, he sets other portions of the Word in new lights."—*C.H. Spurgeon*

"While other parts of Scripture show us the glory of our high calling, this book may instruct us in all minuteness of detail how to "walk worthy" of it (Col 1:10). We see the minuteness of our Christian obligations; that there is not a temper, a look, a word, a movement, the most important action of the day, the smallest relative duty, in which we do not either deface or adorn the image of our Lord, and the profession of His name. Surely if the book conduced to no other end, it tends to humble even the most consistent servant of God, in consciousness of countless failures. The whole book is a mirror for us all, not only to show our defects, but also [as] a guidebook and directory for godly conduct."—*Charles Bridges, from the Preface, 1846*

Charles Bridges (1794-1869) was one of the leaders of the evangelical movement in the Church of England in the mid-1800s. He was Vicar of Old Newton, Suffolk, from 1823 to 1849, and later of Weymouth and Hinton Martell in Dorset. Bridges is known for both literary work such as *The Christian Ministry* and his expositions, which include *Ecclesiastes* and *Psalms 119* as well as *Proverbs*.