

DOES THE BOOK OF PROVERBS PROMISE TOO MUCH?¹

Being composed of simple “proverbial” wisdom, for the most part, the book of Proverbs would seem to see only one side of the picture of life at times. We have statements such as 16:3:

Commit your works to the LORD,
And your plans will succeed (NIV).²

Or, see the repeated promises in a passage such as Proverbs 3:1–10. Here there is “an alternation of command and promise, or ... of command and consequence.”³

The problem is that life’s experiences often do not seem to bear out the great promises found here and elsewhere in the book. Many scholars have noted that such “old wisdom” as is found in Proverbs⁴ is contradicted by such “young wisdom” as is found in Job or Ecclesiastes. Job could not find a moral order in the world; see Job 9:22–24:

(22) It is all the same; that is why I say,
 `He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.
(23) When a scourge brings sudden death,
 he mocks the despair of the innocent.
(24) When a land falls into the hands of the wicked,
 he blindfolds its judges.
 If it is not he, then who is it?

Or, as the author of Ecclesiastes states in 9:2:

As it is with the good man,
 so it is with the sinner;
as it is with those who take oaths,
 so with those afraid to take them.

Even the life of Jesus seems to contradict the strong affirmations about the moral order found in Proverbs. He didn’t live a long life, and he didn’t find much favor with God and man: most people rejected him by the end of his ministry, and even God the

¹Helpful treatments of this issue include LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 557–58 [p. 469 in 2nd ed.]; Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 196–203; Bruce Waltke, “Does Proverbs Promise Too Much?” *CBRF Journal* 128 (1992), 17–22.

²Or, “be established” (NASB).

³Waltke, 17.

⁴“Old” because of the parallels in early Egyptian literature.

Father rejected him on the cross. Jesus didn't have "physical and psychological well-being."⁵ He wasn't rich; indeed, he didn't even have a place to lay his head (Matt. 8:26 // Lk. 9:58).

What, then, do we make of the promises and outlook of the book of Proverbs?

- (1) First, we can and must acknowledge that the proverbs are statements of truth that do indeed obtain *most* of the time. They are usually validated by our experience. It certainly is true that those who are lazy will not usually enjoy abundance (see Proverbs 24:30–34). Or, to take another case, it certainly is true that substance abuse will almost always have tragic results (see Proverbs 23:29–35). These are things validated by our experience.

Yet, of course, sometimes experience shows us something else: that wicked do prosper, and the righteous indeed suffer. The righteous do NOT always experience the blessings spoken of in 3:1–10.

An important part of the task is to know *when* a proverb applies.⁶ This is where the idea of **experience** is importance, or "the right word for the right moment." Consider the following verses juxtaposed *next to* each other (Prov. 26:4-5):

- (4) *Answer not a fool according to his folly, // lest you be like him yourself.*
- (5) *Answer a fool according to his folly, // lest he be wise in his own eyes.*

Here, obviously, one should (or should not) answer a fool depending on the situation! These verses look at the idea of answering a fool from two different perspectives. On the one hand (v. 4), one should *not* entangle oneself with such a person, so as not to become like him. On the other hand (v. 5), sometimes it is good to *challenge* a fool, in order to expose him for what he is.

(2) Second, we must remember that the proverbs express truth without qualifiers. Thus, **Prov 10:15** states a truth about wealth and poverty that appears to endorse wealth as the greater good: "A rich man's wealth is his strong city; // the poverty of the poor is their ruin."

And yet, other proverbs show us the qualifiers.

Proverbs 18:11: "A rich man's wealth is his strong city; // and like a high wall in his imagination."

⁵Waltke, 19.

⁶ See Peter Enns, *Evangelicals, Inspiration, and the 'Problem' of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, **).

Proverbs 23:4–5:

(4) Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. (5) Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.

Proverbs 30:7–9:

(7) "Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: (8) Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. (9) Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.

Sometimes, we see both sides balanced against each other. Thus, in 14:20, we see “the way it is,” while in 14:21 we see the ideal:

(Prov 14:20) The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends.

(Prov 14:21) He who despises his neighbor sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.

Sometimes, we must understand the hyperbole used, such as in the “better than” sections, where the point is to condemn or commend an act or a state of being that is being compared, *not* to commend an evil per se. Thus, Prov 27:5 states that “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” This is not claiming that an open rebuke is good in and of itself; it is most likely bad, but hidden love is even worse.

(3) Third, and in line with the second point, we must remember that the proverbs view the *end* of the matter. There is a genre effect, one that takes a certain perspective. Proverbs emphasize the rosy picture, whereas Job and Ecclesiastes are more pessimistic.

Thus, Proverbs 24:15–16 states the following :

(15) Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against a righteous man's house, do not raid his dwelling place; (16) for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity.

In this passage (esp. v. 16), Job and Ecclesiastes would emphasize the righteous man's *falling*, while Proverbs would emphasize the righteous man's *rising*.

(4) Fourth, we must have an adequate understanding of the *limits* of wisdom. The book of Proverbs itself demonstrates this:

(Prov 15:23) A man finds joy in giving an apt reply-- and how good is a timely word!

(Prov 25:11) A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

Or, expressed another way, we need to remember that, ultimately, things happen according to *God's* perspective, not humans' perspective:

(Prov 16:9) In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

(Prov 16:1–2) To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue. (2) All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.

(Prov 21:31) The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD.

(5) Fifth, Proverbs looks beyond the grave. The following passages illustrate this :

(Prov 12:28) In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality.

(Prov 14:32) When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous have a refuge.

(Prov 23:17–18) Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD. (18) There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off. [See also NASB; *contra* RSV]

(Prov 24:19–20) Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of the wicked, (20) for the evil man has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.