

## ***The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Proverbs (continued)***

**F.F. Bruce**

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Many of the sayings in the Book of Proverbs, taken by themselves in isolation from their context, might be regarded as samples of ordinary worldly wisdom such as the proverbial lore of all nations provides in abundance. The warning against becoming surety for a stranger (Prov. 6:1-2; 11:15) is something that one can learn from experience in any part of the world; while simple people in all ages have proved the blessedness of the saying:

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is,  
Than a stalled ox and hatred therewith (Prov. 15:17).

But it is not merely as counsels taught by experience that these and many other sayings are included here. In the context in which they appear in the Book of Proverbs the wisdom that they enshrine is seen to be an aspect of the *wisdom of God* which is the main subject of the whole work. The lessons learned from experience are lessons taught by God; experience is one of His methods of teaching. When the matter is viewed thus, the Book of Proverbs is recognized as a storehouse of spiritual and not merely secular teaching.

We may think of the spiritual teaching of Proverbs under a number of heads.

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First of all comes the teaching of the book about *the being and character of God*.

Nowhere is it deemed necessary in the Book of Proverbs to prove the existence of God; God's existence is the basic postulate of the book, as it is of the whole Bible. Nor is it deemed necessary to prove the unity of God; it is taken for granted that there is but one God. This God has created all things:

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;  
By understanding He established the heavens (Prov. 3:19).

The Creator of all is also the Disposer supreme:

The lot is cast into the lap;  
But the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord (Prov. 16:33).

His purpose cannot be thwarted, whatever the plans of men may be:

There are many devices in a man's heart;  
But the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand (Prov. 19:21).

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He is omniscient, and nothing escapes His attention, especially in all that affects mankind:

The eyes of the Lord are in every place,  
Keeping watch upon the evil and the good (Prov. 15:3).

And, above all, He is righteous and merciful; He delights in righteousness and mercy on the part of men, and everything that is unrighteous or unmerciful is an abomination in His sight. The wisdom of God is so imbued with the ideal of righteousness that it is as much ethical as intellectual in quality:

All the words of my mouth are in righteousness;  
There is nothing crooked or perverse in them (Prov. 8:8).

And those who learn the divine wisdom show now well they have learned their lesson by manifesting righteousness and mercy in their lives and actions; this is the fear of the Lord, which is the first lesson taught in Wisdom's school.

God takes care of His people:  
The Lord will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish;  
But He thrusteth away the desire of the wicked (Prov. 50:3).

In particular, the destitute and underprivileged have a special place in His interest:

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Rob not the poor, because he is poor,  
Neither oppress the afflicted in the gate:  
For the Lord will plead their cause,  
And despoil of life those that despoil them (Prov. 22:22-23).

He is the true defence of men, "a shield to them that walk in integrity" (Prov. 2:7):

The name of the Lord is a strong tower;  
The righteous runneth into it, and is safe (Prov. 18:10).

He is the Hearer of prayer (15:29); the Rewarder of righteousness and mercy (19:17); the One whose blessing is enrichment in itself (10:22).

Men ought therefore to render Him grateful worship and show their appreciation of His goodness:

Honour the Lord with thy substance,  
And with the firstfruits of all thine increase (Prov. 3:9).

But sacrifice is no substitute for uprightness:

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord;  
But the prayer of the wicked is His delight (Prov. 15:8).

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To do justice and judgment  
Is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice (Prov. 21:3).

Men's truest gratitude to God lies in their manifesting the character and conduct that He delights in, and in putting all their trust in Him. Time and again throughout the book an attitude of complete confidence in God is inculcated: "whoso trusteth in the Lord, happy is he" (Prov. 16:20).

Thus all that the Book of Proverbs teaches about God is not only in complete agreement with the teaching of the Law and the Prophets, but is also seen to be in harmony with the teaching of the Gospels, where we read that the tithing of mint and anise and cummin is no substitute for judgment and mercy and faith; and that a confident trust in God is the attitude which He delights to find in men.

*(To be continued)*

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