

Gleaning Wisdom from the Proverbs, #11—

**"Freedom, Fate, and Faith:
Your Part and God's Part
in the Affairs of Daily Life**
(Themes from the Proverbs)

--CEFC 12/2/18; 2/8/87pm

My son Will brought to my attention this week
an ancient middle-eastern document originally written in Akkadian,
that recounts a dialogue between a master and his slave.¹

In part, it goes like this:

- [Slave, listen to me!]
- Here I am, master, here I am!
- [Quickly! Fetch me the chariot and hitch it up.
I want to drive to the palace.
- Drive, master, drive! It will be to your advantage.
When he will see you, the king will give you honors.

- [O well, slave] I will not drive to the palace!
- Do not drive, master, do not drive!
When he will see you, the king may send you God knows where,
He may make you take a route that you do not know,
He will make you suffer agony day and night.

- Slave, listen to me!
- Here I am, master, here I am
- Quickly! Fetch me water for my hands, I want to dine!
- Dine, master, dine!
A good meal relaxes the mind!
To wash one's hand passes the time!

- O well, slave, I will not dine!
- Do not dine, master, do not dine!
To eat only when one is hungry,
to drink only when one is thirsty is best for man!

- Slave, listen to me!
- Here I am, master, here I am!
- Quickly! Fetch me my chariot. I am going to hunt!
- Drive, master, drive!

¹ *The Dialogue of Pessimism* (<http://www.gatewaystobabylon.com/myths/texts/classic/dialoguepessimism.htm>).

A hunter gets his belly filled!
 The hunting dog will break the bones of the prey!
 The raven that scours the country can feed its nest!

- O well, slave, I will not hunt!
 - Do not go, master, do not go! –
 The hunter's luck changes!
 The hunting dog's teeth will get broken!
 The raven that scours the country has a hole in the wall as a home.

- Slave, listen to me!
 - Here I am, master, here I am!
 - I want to invest silver.
 - Invest, master, invest.
 The man who invests keeps his capital while his interest is enormous!

- O well, slave, I do not want to invest silver!
 - Do not invest, master, do not invest!
 Making loans is as sweet as making love,
 but getting them back is like having children!
 They will take away your capital, cursing you without ceasing.
 They will make you lose the interest on the capital!

And finally—

- Slave, listen to me!
 - Here I am, master, here I am!
 - What then is good? To have my neck and yours broken,
 Or to be thrown into the river, is that good?
 - [O Master,] Who is so tall as to ascend to heaven?
 Who is so broad as to encompass the entire world?
 - O well, slave, I will kill you and send you first! -
 - Yes, but my master would certainly not survive me for three days!...

There it is--
 this rather humorous example of ancient Mesopotamian literature
 was written about 1000 BC,
 about the time of King Solomon.
 It illustrates the problem with proverbial wisdom—
 it can be used to justify almost anything.

Our contemporary proverbs are no different—

We say, "Look before you leap."
 But we also say, "He who hesitates is lost."

There's "Many hands make light work."
But also "Too many cooks spoil the broth."

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder."
but, "Out of sight, out of mind."

"Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today."
but, "Don't cross the bridge until you come to it."

"It's better to be safe than sorry."
but, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."
but, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts."

"Hitch your wagon to a star."
but, "Don't bite off more than you can chew."

So which is it?

And, as we've mentioned, we see the same thing in the book of Proverbs—
where we read: **"Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you will be like him yourself."**

But also, **"Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes."**

What's going on?

And it's not as if we are uncovering some blatant contradiction in the Bible here.

These two proverbs are immediately adjacent to one another

in two consecutive verses (Prov. 26:4,5)!

The writer intends us to see this juxtaposition.

So which is it?

Do we answer a fool or not?

The proverbs by themselves can't tell you—

That's why two verses after these "answering a fool" verses we have two other verses
that address our question.

Prov. 26:7— **"a proverb in the mouth of a fool
is like a lame man's legs that hang limp."**

In other words, a proverb in the mouth of a fool is useless.

And then two verses later-- **"a proverb in the mouth of a fool
is like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand"** (Prov. 26:9).

A proverb in the mouth of a fool is not only useless,
it can be dangerous.

You see, proverbs do not give us absolute truths or unconditional promises.

Prov. 22:6 says—**"Train a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not turn from it."**

This does not promise that perfect parenting will always lead to perfect kids.

No, proverbs give us general principles about the way life works,
but you need wisdom to apply the right proverb
to the particular situation you encounter.

This morning we are going to seek that kind of situational wisdom
as we look at two apparently contradictory themes in the book of Proverbs.
I've given this sermon the title: "Freedom, Fate, and Faith:
Our Part and God's Part in the Everyday Affairs of Life."
as we wrestle with an apparent contradiction in the vision of life we find in this book.

I want to begin with the theme of freedom,
or perhaps better stated as human responsibility.

Listen to these words from William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus*:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced nor cried aloud:
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

There is something stirring about these words.

You have to admire the strength of character they reveal--
a determination to take responsibility for one's own life—
no use passing the buck,
no use whining about bad luck,
no lustful longing for the "what-might-have-been"s.

Here is a person who takes the initiative in life,
who consciously assumes control of his circumstances,
or who at least never bows in surrender to them.

I think this sort of person would be greatly admired
by the contributors our book of Proverbs.

They seek to give us wisdom for living;
they are offering advice for those who believe that their choices matter.

These proverbs are not for those who believe that their lives
are just swept along by the unknown and unseen forces of fate.

Life is not just a matter of rolling the dice to see what comes up.

It is orderly;

certain principles lie below the surface to give meaning to what happens.

Wisdom was the craftsman at God's side

when he caused the world to come into being.

As a result, there are rational rules that govern human activity

just as much as there are rational rules that govern the natural world.

In both cases, one can observe the patterns of human activity

and discern the rules that govern them.

So, for example, we see the acts/consequences relationship—

a person reaps what he sows.

Hard work will be rewarded;

righteousness will bring happiness.

Prov. 13:21—"Misfortune pursues the sinner,

but prosperity is the reward of the righteous."

Prov. 11:8—"The righteous man is rescued from trouble,

and it comes on the wicked instead."

Wisdom consists in seeking to understand these rational rules,

and trying to put them into practice,

living them out to one's own advantage.

Things like—

Prov. 10:4--**Lazy hands make a man poor,**

but diligent hands bring wealth.

or Prov. 11:15-- **Whoever puts up security for a stranger will surely suffer,**

but whoever refuses to shake hands in pledge is safe.

The wise man is a scientist of human behavior—

the psychologist of the Bible—

looking for the precepts and principles by which one should order one's life.

Each person is responsible for the outcome of his own life.

Their destiny is in their own hands.

It is no wonder, then, that the Proverbs urge thoughtful deliberation and careful planning.

21:5--**The plans of the diligent lead to profit**

as surely as haste leads to poverty.

15:22--**Plans fail for lack of counsel,**

but with many advisers they succeed.

Prov. 20:18--**Make plans by seeking advice;
if you wage war, obtain guidance.**

11:14--**For lack of guidance a nation falls,
but many advisers make victory sure.**

Life is rational and orderly.

We human beings are responsible for the choices we make.
Follow the right rules and you will get the right result.
You can be the master of your fate
and the captain of your soul.

But just when you think you've got it all figured out,
you stumble upon some of the Proverbs like these--

16:9--**In his heart a man plans his course,
but the Lord determines his steps.**

19:21--**Many are the plans in a man's heart,
but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.**

20:24--**A man's steps are directed by the Lord.
How then can anyone understand his own way?**

21:1--**The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord;
he directs it wherever he pleases.**

21:30--**There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan
that can succeed against the Lord.**

For all its insistence on the rational nature of life—
with principles discoverable by observation,
the wise man knows that God always has the last word.

There is always "The Divine Veto."
God remains sovereign over all that happens in his world.
No human decision can overrule the divine will.

To quote Shakespeare,
"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will." (Hamlet)

The proverbs are often accused of being overly secular in their interests
and in their view of life.

But it is here that the irrepressible **faith** of the wise men comes to the fore.
Never forget that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

For all the rational patterns one may find in life,

for the all the rules for wise living that may be discovered through experience,
 and the sense that we are responsible for shaping our own destiny,
 a deeper reality must always be taken into account—
 a reality that ultimately can only be discerned through the eyes of faith.
 The world we live in and work in and play in,
 the world of our politics and even the world of vast geopolitical intrigues—
this world is **God's** world.

This is critical in developing a Christian world view—
 I think the proverbs has much to teach us at this point.

The essential truth is this:

"man proposes, but God disposes."
 We are free and responsible in our experience;
 but underlying it all, God is ultimately in control.

And this truth that God has the final word
 and ultimately controls and overrules our actions
 and acts according to his own will and purposes—
 this truth is fundamental to the faith of the Old Testament
 and of the Bible as a whole.

We read in the Psalms--

Ps. 33:10,11—"The Lord foils the plans of the nations;
 he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.
 But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
 the purposes of his heart through all generations."

And in the prophet Isaiah--

Is. 46:9—"I am God, and there is no other;
 I am God, and there is none like me.
 10 I make known the end from the beginning,
 from ancient times, what is still to come.
 I say: My purpose will stand,
 and I will do all that I please."

And in the New Testament, we have Paul's words--

Eph. 1:11—"In [Christ] we were also chosen,
 having been predestined according to the plan of him
 who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will"

The Bible taken as a whole is the story of
 the working out of God's sovereign purposes in human history—
 from beginning to end—
 from Genesis to Revelation.

Various episodes illustrate this divine direction in human affairs—

In the book of Exodus, the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart
 so that he would send the Israelites forth to their promised land.

Or later in biblical history,
 the Lord uses King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to punish his people,
 and then uses Cyrus of Persia to liberate them.

Or I think of the example in Genesis of Joseph, sold by his brothers into slavery.
 But when the brothers were reunited, Joseph tells them--
**"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good
 to accomplish what is now being done,
 the saving of many lives"** (Gen. 50:20).

And ultimately this sovereign hand of God
 is proclaimed in the words of Peter on the day of Pentecost--
 Speaking of Jesus to the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem, he says,
**"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge;
 and you, with the help of wicked men put him to death
 by nailing him to the cross."** --Acts 2:23

Jesus said, **"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?
 Yet not one of them will fall to the ground
 apart from the will of your Father"** (Matt. 10:29).

We are responsible for our choices;
 and we must act in the freedom which we experience as moral agents,
 but God is still sovereign.

How these two biblical truths hold together
 is one of the great mysteries of existence,
 and I consider it very dangerous to affirm one without the other.

Some people, in an effort to distance God from tragedy and evil,
 assert human freedom as somehow absolute,
 over-ruling God's rule.

When a child dies in a car accident
 or a shooter murders a dozen people at a school,
 it seems almost blasphemous to say that God somehow **wills** those things.
 Surely, God can't be sovereign over everything, they say.

God wanted a loving relationship, with real persons, they argue.
 So he decided to take the risk of creating human beings with free will,
 and how could he know what they would choose?

He has to simply let things play out according to the rules he's established,
 and his hands are tied.

God didn't know that that drunk driver would choose to pull in front of your car.
 It was out of his control.

We simply have to learn to love God despite his limitations
 and even forgive him for creating such a world. /

But is God so powerless that he could not have prevented such tragedies?

And is God so limited that he could not somehow put those awful events
 into some greater context in which they can ultimately result in some good?
 Are we wiser than God?

And if such events are outside of God's control
 where can we find any assurance at all
 that evil itself will one day be overcome
 and justice will be done?
 How can there be a heaven if human freedom always entails the possibility of evil?

This "limited God" is certainly not the God of the Bible,
 and one wonders whether that kind of God is truly worthy
 of one's ultimate worship and faith.

It was Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel who put it best:
 "If that's who God is, why doesn't he resign
 and let someone more competent take his place?"

But others may so emphasize God's sovereignty
 that they refuse to act at all.
 "Let go and let God" is their slogan,
 as they abdicate their own responsibility for their choices.

They become fatalistic,
 resigning themselves to some deterministic universe
 in which they become mere spectators rather than actors.
 Everything that happens is simply the "will of God,"
 so why should we even try to change things?

Why pray if God knows everything anyway?
 Why seek to live righteously if God has already determined every outcome?

Neither of these will do—
 As hard as this may be to comprehend,
 we are responsible actors in a world in which God is ultimately sovereign.

The Proverbs gives us both sides of this truth—
 On the one hand, Prov. 15:22—
**"Plans fail for lack of counsel,
 but with many advisers they succeed."**

On the other, Prov. 19:21—
**"Many are the plans in a man's heart,
 but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."**

We must affirm both—
 and in Prov. 21:31 we have them both held together—
**"The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
 but victory rests with the LORD."**

So how do we apply this proverbial wisdom rightly?
It depends on the state of the person we are addressing.

To the complacent, the self-reliant, and the sluggard—
the person who neglects their own responsibility
and fails to see their role as a moral agent,
I say, Get up and get with it!
Do what is right;
What you sow, you will reap.

I think of the Israelites, after they had escaped from Egypt--
they were being pursued by the Pharaoh's army,
and Moses says to the people,

"Do not be afraid.

Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. . . .

The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Then the LORD said to Moses,

"Why are you crying out to me?

Tell the Israelites to move on" (Ex. 14:13-15).

Don't just stand there—get moving!

I like the story of the man who constantly prayed that he would win the lottery.
Eventually, he shook his fist heavenward
and demanded that God explain why he wasn't answering his fervent prayer.
"My son," God replied, "you need to come halfway to meet me.
You could at least buy a ticket!"²

We are called to act—
and we are responsible for what we do.

But on the other side, there are the anxious—
those who fret and are fearful,
always worried that they haven't done enough,
planned enough,
prayed enough.

The burden of the whole world seems to be bearing down on their shoulders.
They are afraid to make any decisions, lest they somehow ruin their lives.

To them I say, Trust God;
believe that he will be using even our bad decisions for our good.
This world is in his hands, and so are we—
we are his beloved children—there is nothing to fear.
Nothing is outside the sovereign rule
of the glorious King who is our heavenly Father.

God's wisdom needs to be wisely applied.
Which of these two messages do you need to hear this morning?

² found in NT Wright—*After you Believe*, p. 259.

There are many of us, I'm sure, who feel comfortable in the world of the Proverbs—
the world of work, of family life, of interpersonal relationships, and so on—
the everyday world in which we live our lives.

But we must be sure that our lives have this crucial element –
the providential power of God at work in all that goes on around us and in us.

For all its praise of prudence and sound judgment,
the wise man of Proverbs exalts faith over sagacity;
trust in God's guidance and power over trust in one's own common sense--

Consider the words of this very familiar passage--

3:5-8--**Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make yours paths straight.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord and shun evil.
This will bring health to your body
and nourishment to your bones.**

One of the marks of real wisdom is the knowledge of its own limits—
It is strong when it knows its own weakness.

Indeed, one writer in the Proverbs can declare specifically
that the object of his maxims is to foster, not self-reliance, but faith:
Prov. 22:19--(apply your heart to what I teach, he says,)
“**So that your trust may be in the Lord**”

Isn't this why the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord?

What could trusting in the Lord mean in its context in the Proverbs?--
Certainly it can't exclude the diligent pursuit of wisdom,
the shrewd observation of life,
careful planning and deliberation.
It can't exclude strenuous labor, hard work.

But it must also include a conviction that something deeper,
something higher is at work in life—

It is God's world after all.

He can and will do with it what he wants.

We must never forget that!

3:5-8--**Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make yours paths straight.**

19:21--**Many are the plans in a man's heart,
but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.**

21:30--**There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan
that can succeed against the Lord.**

21:31—"The horse is made ready for the day of battle,"
--and the book of Proverbs helps us to do that,
Live wisely this week--at work, at school, in the home--
but just remember, "**victory rests with the Lord.**"

Would we want it any other way?

This morning we come to the Lord's Table to celebrate God's glorious gospel,
and it is here where God's part and our part need to be carefully parsed.

The gospel is not a 50-50 proposition where we do our part and God does his.

No, God does it all—

Paul writes:—"You see, at just the right time, when we were still **powerless**,
Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6).

When we were powerless—

when we could do nothing to save ourselves,

God sent his own Son into the world to rescue us from our sin.

Jesus did what we could never do for ourselves—

he lived the righteous life we ought to have lived, but didn't.

And he gave his life as a sacrifice for our sin.

By his atoning death and victorious resurrection we are redeemed by God's grace.

Our justification before God is by grace alone,

through faith alone,

on the basis of the work of Christ alone.

He has done it all—

all we have to offer him is our own sin.

We don't choose Christ;

no, he chose us—before the foundation of the world.

The Bible speaks of our election by God,

predestining us into a saving relationship with Christ.

Our salvation is his work, not ours, from first to last.

And I believe that he will hold us fast in his love to the very end.

And yet, we are still called to respond to that electing grace—

we are under obligation to offer ourselves to God in faith and obedience.

We have a responsibility to persevere in faith until our last breath,

and to seek with all our heart the godly life to which we are called.

Peter writes,

“[God’s] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness
through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.
Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises,
so that through them you may participate in the divine nature
and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.
For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness;
and to goodness, knowledge;
and to knowledge, self-control;
and to self-control, perseverance;
and to perseverance, godliness;
and to godliness, brotherly kindness;
and to brotherly kindness, love.
For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure,
they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive
in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind,
and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.
Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure.
For if you do these things, you will never fall,
and you will receive a rich welcome
into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In his sovereign grace, God has chosen you in Christ;
now respond to that grace,
seek to grow in that grace in increasing godliness,
and so make your calling and election sure.

Prayer as our servers come forward—

Communion:

Living Wisely in God's World:
Dec. 2, 2018

**"Freedom, Fate, and Faith:
Your Part and God's Part
in the Affairs of Daily Life
(Themes from the Proverbs)**

Proverbs can be tricky, as they often appear to affirm contradictory truths. This morning we consider one of the most mysterious—God's sovereignty and human responsibility. It takes great wisdom to apply God's truth rightly.

I. We are responsible for our choices

II. God is sovereign over his world

III. Applying proverbial wisdom rightly:

To complacent and sluggish—

To the anxious and fretful—

*"Therefore, my brothers and sisters,
make every effort
to make your calling and election sure" (2 Pet. 1:10)*

Sermon Response:

**"Freedom, Fate, and Faith:
Your Part and God's Part in the Affairs of Daily Life
(Themes from the Proverbs)**

- Do you more often feel that you are “the master of your fate and the captain of your soul;” or that you are a victim of circumstances beyond your control?
- How do the Proverbs that speak of human responsibility and the rewards of diligence and the consequences of good choices encourage you?
- How do the Proverbs that speak of the sovereignty of God over human affairs give you comfort?
- Which of these Proverbs do you most need to hear right now?
- How does the gospel speak to both of these themes?

Freedom, Fate, and Faith Selected Proverbs

[please read the verses without the references]

Prov. 13:21—"Misfortune pursues the sinner,
but prosperity is the reward of the righteous."

Prov. 11:8—"The righteous man is rescued from trouble,
and it comes on the wicked instead."

Prov. 10:4--**Lazy hands make a man poor,
but diligent hands bring wealth.**

21:5--The plans of the diligent lead to profit
as surely as haste leads to poverty.

**19:21--Many are the plans in a man's heart,
but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.**

Prov. 20:18--Make plans by seeking advice;
if you wage war, obtain guidance.

16:9--**In his heart a man plans his course,
but the Lord determines his steps.**

20:24--**A man's steps are directed by the Lord.
How then can anyone understand his own way?**

20:26 A wise king winnows out the wicked;
he drives the threshing wheel over them.

**21:1--The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord;
he directs it wherever he pleases.**

15:22--Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed.

21:30--**There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan
that can succeed against the Lord.**

11:14--For lack of guidance a nation falls,
but many advisers make victory sure.

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