

Gleaners Bible Studies c 5

PICTURES FROM THE PROVERBS (PART 2)

Study 1

The Beauty of Friendship

Read

Proverbs 18: 24 and 27: 1-22

The Book of Proverbs has much to say about human relationships. If you read through carefully, you will find that every kind of relationship is mentioned. There is no doubt about it, if the advice in Proverbs was followed, many of the so-called social problems in this country today could be overcome. Take for instance this one: **"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."** - Proverbs 14: 34.

How true to life this proverb is. Disaster eventually comes when wicked people dictate the terms of a nation. All Christians, even the young in the faith, need to pray that righteousness and truth will prevail in our land.

In your private study of Proverbs you will find the following a most interesting exercise. Write out the Ten Commandments given in **Exodus 20**. Then, as you are reading through the book, jot down alongside them the references of those verses which uphold the different commands. You will find that the writers absolutely honour the commands of God. Take the first commandment and then write down the number of references to the **"fear of the Lord"** and similar terms. The book of Proverbs encourages us to put God first.

Our study of the subject of 'friendship' fits more into the second commandment, **"Love your neighbour as your self"**. (**Matthew 22: 34-40**) There is much said in this book about the way in which we should treat others. **Proverbs 11: 12** tells us that **"He who is devoid of wisdom despises his neighbour."** (See also **Proverbs 25: 18**) Much too, is said about the poor. Different proverbs teach that kindness and consideration should be given to the less fortunate members of society; see for example **Proverbs 14: 20** and **Proverbs 19: 17**. You will find that those who gossip and carry tales to the hurt of others, are condemned, **Proverbs 11: 13; 16: 28; 25: 8-10**. We think here of the way in which the Lord dealt with the rich man who asked: **"Who is my neighbour?"** The atmosphere of the story of the Good Samaritan lies within many of the proverbs which deal with neighbours and friends. (See **Luke 10: 25-37**)

We can find some very wonderful thoughts in this book connected with friendship. We are going to look at some of these in this study.

1. **"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."** Proverbs 17: 17.

True friendship is built upon FAITHFULNESS. Changing conditions and circumstances should not alter the character of our friendship. How good it is when we find people who do not let us down. Their word is their bond. We find the quality of true love in them. One of the most expressive pictures of friendship is the one seen in the relationship between David and Jonathan. Jonathan was King Saul's son. Saul hated David bitterly and threatened his son with death if he associated with David. Yet Jonathan proved the strength of his love by sticking to David through thick and thin. Consider the character of this love and then the way in which he proved his strength. (See **1 Samuel 20**) Do you show your friends this kind of loyalty? You will find it helpful to look at some of the proverbs from this personal point of view.

2. **"Do not forsake your own friend or your father's friend, nor go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity;**

for better is a neighbour nearby than a brother far away." Proverbs 27: 10.

Think about these words. In the day of trouble, to whom should you turn? This proverb tells us that if we make good friends, who become close to us, those are the people to whom we can turn in times of trouble. Relatives, who live far away, cannot give us the help that friends who are near-by can. But there is something more contained in this statement. To turn to friends for help in times of trouble is to honour them with our trust. We should be able to count on their help. In turn, they should be able to come to us in their hour of need.

3. **"Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful."** Proverbs 27: 6

Have you ever had a friend who 'told you off'. It may be that you were doing something foolish or wrong, and one who was really fond of you told you about it. It hurts at the time, doesn't it? But if you listen to the advice that is given, it could save you a lot of unhappiness. It wounds, yet, as **Proverbs 27: 9** tells us, the counsel of friendship is sweet like ointment and perfume. Think about this carefully. Friendship builds good qualities into life.

4. **"As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend."** Proverbs 27: 17

Evil friends corrupt our lives if we allow ourselves to become like them. Conversely, good Christian friends bring beauty into our lives as we become like them, and they in turn benefit from our friendship. The old saying, 'A man is known by the company he keeps', still rings true today. In **Acts 4: 13** we read how the crowd learned from Peter and John that they had been with Jesus because of the way they spoke. Do people realise this about YOU?

5. **"There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."** Proverbs 18: 24

Where can we find perfect friendship? How sad it is when we hear people say 'I didn't have a friend I could turn to!' There IS a Friend who sticks closer than a brother, and our minds immediately go to the Lord Jesus. What did He say? **"You are MY friends if you do whatever I command you."** (**John 15: 14**) We can find residing in the Lord Jesus, all those qualities of friendship we have been thinking of, and many more. He never fails; He is always at hand when we need Him and shares so much good counsel with us, that if we obey Him we shall never go wrong. Best of all, through enjoying His company, we shall become like Him. Do you know Him as YOUR friend? – 'He's only a prayer away!'

Study 2

The Influence of Words

Read

Proverbs chapter 15

It would take a long time to collect together all that the book of Proverbs says about 'words'. Communication plays a very important part in our world and in our personal lives. We may think many things and have deep inner feelings, yet never make people aware of these, unless we speak. Thus, Proverbs places tremendous stress on the power of words and speech (the use of the tongue), both for good and for ill. What we say, whether through advice, or rebuke, or gossip, or tempting suggestion, betrays what we ARE (see **Matthew 12: 34-37**). The tongue is an incalculable force; it takes a wise man or woman to master it. Read also **James chapter 3**. One of the most serious features of communication is the fact that words once spoken can never be recalled. Careless speech can be cruel and leave untold unhappiness in its wake.

Remember this. Thus the Proverbs are full of sound advice and timely warning. Notice what one of these proverbs says: **“Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (Proverbs 18: 21)**

This, at first reading, may seem an exaggeration, yet further consideration will make us realise how true it is. Through our words we express our thoughts. It is said that as a man thinks in his heart, so he is. You will therefore understand that people can soon find out what we are through the way we speak. It is not surprising then that Proverbs links the words of our lips with those things that are within our hearts. So, in **Proverbs 12: 23** we read: **“the heart of fools proclaims foolishness.”** Here the foolishness expressed in words, is merely the out flow of a foolish heart. Contrast this with the lovely ideas expressed in **Proverbs 22: 11**. **“He who loves purity of heart, and has grace on his lips, The king will be his friend.”**

The Lord Jesus probably had this in mind when He said: **“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12: 34)** It is significant therefore, that people said of Jesus: **“No man ever spoke like this Man!” (John 7: 46)** We should be so thankful today that we have recorded for us many of the wonderful words of the Lord Jesus.

1. WRONG WORDS

Proverbs warns frequently of the dangers and the evils of wrong speaking. Some of these are worth examining in more detail.

A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.” (Proverbs 16: 28) “Where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.” (Proverbs 26: 20)

The habit of backbiting – damaging people’s characters behind their backs – is evil indeed. Many good relationships have been spoilt by maliciously talking about others. Beware of this wrong use of words.

“A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.” (Proverbs 11: 13 and Proverbs 20: 19)

We often speak of honouring confidence. Much damage is done by people who gossip and carry tales about others. Beware of the person who says: ‘I was told this in confidence’ – they have already broken it by passing on the information to you. We can think of a man called Doeg who told tales about King David when he was in exile. (**1 Samuel 22: 6-23**) Saul was so angry with the priests who had helped David that all except one were slain. Be careful that you only speak well of your friends.

“Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight.” Proverbs 12: 22

Make a list, as you study, of those proverbs which have to do with lying. There are many! God loves those who are truthful. Today, people think nothing of false speaking and so-called ‘white lies’ are generally acceptable in our society. How sad to realise that we can no longer be certain that men are telling us the truth! Remember too, that exaggeration is a form of lying. To say something is bigger or better, longer or smaller, greater or fewer, than it really is, is straying from the truth, and is, therefore, a lie! Does your story ‘grow in the telling’, or do you tell it ‘just as it was?’ How easy it is to slip into exaggeration, so as to make the story more interesting. The Lord Jesus expects Christians to be like Him, and He is **‘THE TRUTH’.**(**John 14: 6**)

2. GOOD WORDS

So much for wrong words. Now let us look at some good words, their influence and meaning. We can look at these in three ways. A lot of study will have to be done by you if you want to find out all that Proverbs says in this connection.

a) PURITY. Good words must be pure and right. **“A wholesome tongue is a tree of life.” (Proverbs 15: 4)**

The idea here is of words that bring healing or health. (see **Proverbs 12: 18**) People who are sad or troubled would appreciate these kind of words. There is also the need for faithfulness, truth and honesty. **Proverbs 25: 13** is a lovely proverb and illustrates the blessing of those who speak true words; so, too, is **“righteous lips are the delight of kings.” (Proverbs 16: 13)** It is good to be able to rely on those things that we say to each other. Remember, -

“Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.” (Proverbs 16: 24) How good it is if folk can rely on you always to tell them the truth.

b) PEACE. The book of Proverbs encourages that kind of speech which brings peace and calm – not contention and strife **“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15: 1 also Proverbs 25: 15)** Self-control is essential in all that we say. Notice again the way in which James illustrates the power of the tongue in **James 3: 5**. It is **“a fire, a world of iniquity.”** It is much better to make peace than to break peace by the things that we say. I shall always remember something that a friend of the family once said to me when I was young: ‘Before you say anything about anyone, ask yourself three questions: ‘Is it true?’, ‘Is it kind?’, ‘Is it necessary?’ If we always did this, I am sure we would avoid causing so much grief and strife in others.

c) PURPOSE. There is every indication in Proverbs that what we say should have purpose. Look at **Proverbs 15: 23**. Just as a craftsman takes pleasure in his work, so those who speak **“a word spoken in due season”** should find pleasure in them. There are some beautiful pictures here of the true worth of good words. They are **“like choice silver”, (Proverbs 10: 20) “Like apples of gold in settings of silver.” (Proverbs 25: 11) see also Proverbs 25: 12 and Proverbs 10: 32.**

Just two things as we finish. Compare these thoughts with all that the New Testament says about words and the tongue. Then make this your prayer.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.” (Psalm 19: 14)

Study 3

A Group of Fours

Proverbs chapter 30

This is an interesting chapter. It was not written by Solomon and does not form part of his collection of sayings. Who Agur was we do not know, but it is more than likely that he was a non-Israelite (i.e. a Gentile) who had knowledge of the true God. It is interesting then that his writings were felt to be important enough to be included in the Scriptures. We are going to look at some special features of the chapter, but it will be good if you read the whole chapter through carefully.

Two things mark the writer in the early verses.

Firstly, he seems aware of his own lack of understanding and knowledge. There may be a touch of sarcasm in these opening words of his (especially **verse 2**), for he was confronted by those who professed to know all about God and His dealings. Agur himself longs after the knowledge of God and confesses his utter ignorance, shared, it seems, with the rest of mankind. Agur is obviously a man whose close observance of life and nature had taught him humility. In **verse 3** he tells us that he felt he had not learned wisdom, or had knowledge of the Holy One; (notice how these two words occur again here). The language of **verse 4** clearly reminds me of the way in which Job often speaks. Both Enoch and Elijah had ascended, but none had been known to return. (compare **John 3: 13**)

Secondly, - and this must be good – Agur had a great sense of the value of God’s Word. It would be good if you made **verses 5-6** a guide for your Bible reading. Why not start by memorising them? However, take care that you heed the warning of **verse 6**. God’s revelation must not be mixed with human speculation and theory which may prove to be totally wrong. (Compare **Psalm 18: 30**) **Notice next his desires in verses 7-9.** This wise man prays to be preserved from the temptations of riches and poverty alike, desiring a moderate life with no excesses. You will see that he wants to reverence the Name of his God. This is a healthy desire and goes well with a love for God’s Word.

Verses 11-14 are interesting as you read through the chapter. We are going to look at some 'fours' in this lesson; and here are four 'generations' of people who are guilty of evil things. If you think about them carefully, you will realise that they are four studies in arrogance.

1. In the **first** case in **verse 11** they are people who do not honour their parents; they despise their advice and counsel, considering in their arrogance that they know better.
2. The **second** in **verse 12** are arrogant in their self-righteousness. (We can think of the Pharisees as a good example here)
3. The **third**, in **verse 13** are socially arrogant; what we today would call "snobs".
4. The **fourth** in **verse 14** could be said to be arrogant because of their wealth, or success in business. How often we hear of this type of arrogance today, where the little one-man business is despised and 'devoured' by the big super stores.

So, in these **verses 11-14** we have a picture of arrogance touching all four main areas of life; the home, the church, the social scene and the business world; always leaving unhappiness and destruction in its wake.

We will now look at the other groups of four in this chapter:

1. FOUR INSATIABLE THINGS - verses 15-16.

These never say "enough":

- i. **The Grave.**
- ii. **The Barren Womb.**
- iii. **The Barren Desert.**
- iv. **The Fire, which never says, 'Enough!'**

These are not attractive things to think about. They bring to mind thoughts linked with death, dissatisfaction and destruction. The writer says that these never reach saturation point – they are never satisfied. In a world such as ours, with all its failure and sin, elements abound which never seem to find their fill of evil. But in the Lord Jesus we can find all the very best values in life to the full. He can fully satisfy our every need. (Compare **Isaiah 55: 1-3; 5-6**)

2. FOUR MARVELLOUS THINGS - verses 18-19.

These are past human understanding. Agur finds four sources of wonder:

- i. **How the eagle can soar in the air.**
- ii. **How the snake (serpent) can move without legs.**
- iii. **How a ship can ride on the waves.**
- iv. **The mysterious attraction which draws a man to a woman.**

It is good to find amazing things in life. Sadly, so many people today have lost the power to stand still and contemplate creation with awe and wonder. Yet, among all the amazing things we do find in the course of our lives, there is none greater than the amazing love and grace of God to sinners such as us. Have you ever felt the wonder of God's love? 'O the wonder of it all, the wonder of it all, just to think that God loves me!'

3. FOUR UNBEARABLE THINGS - verses 21-23.

These represent strange things, yet they tell us of people (two from each sex) who have a wrong approach to life.

- i. **First, a servant who, instead of serving, becomes king.**

We can imagine his unkingly bearing which would undoubtedly annoy everyone. But think of the Lord Jesus here. He was the complete reversal of this. He WAS King and will one day be 'King

of Kings' and 'Lord of Lords', yet He humbled Himself to become a servant in a very wonderful way. (**Philippians 2**) There was nothing unbearable about the way He lived!

- ii. **But next we have the fool who becomes rich and prosperous.**

We have perhaps all met such loud and ostentatious men, and found them unbearable. There is another old proverb which says: 'a fool and his money are soon parted' and there is a sense in which these two go together.

- iii. **Thirdly, there is a bitter woman when she finally marries.**

Possibly for what she can get out of such a marriage, rather than for any more honourable reason – such a woman must be unbearable to live with.

- iv. **Lastly, a maidservant who is heir to her mistress;** she would be waiting for the day when her mistress' goods would be her own.

Greed and envy could fill her heart and even hatred towards her mistress. These four things are certainly unbearable!

4. FOUR LITTLE WISE THINGS - verses 24-28.

This group is perhaps the most interesting of all. Look at the creatures first, and then at their wisdom. Ants, conies, locusts and spiders, or, as some understand it, lizards. Naturally speaking, these are weak, insignificant members of creation. Yet each has its own peculiar wisdom to enable it to survive.

- i. **In the face of winter starvation, the ANT provides food for itself in advance so that it can survive.**

Notice the way in which in **chapter 6: 6. Proverbs** uses the ant to condemn laziness.

- ii. **In the face of danger, the CONEY (Rock Badger) hides itself in the impregnable rock.**

This little animal realises its weakness and vulnerability so it hides in the strongest place. Let's take a lesson from the coney and become aware of our need to shelter in the Lord Jesus, who is our Rock and the source of our strength.

- iii. **The LOCUSTS cluster together in their awareness of being small.**

'Safety in numbers' could be their motto! For, although they have no king to lead them, by working together in harmony they conquer great possessions through moving in ordered ranks. This is wise thinking and can teach us yet another lesson. We, who are followers of Christ, could conquer much of Satan's territory by going forward, working together.

- iv. **The SPIDER (LIZARD) lays hold of every opportunity** – so that she is found even in kings' palaces! The lesson for us is clear here. As Christians we should seek to make Christ known at every opportunity and in whatever situation we find ourselves.

5. FOUR MAJESTIC THINGS - verses 29-31.

In these four things we feel the sense of power, stateliness and dignity.

- i. **The Lion.**
- ii. **The Greyhound. (Some translations read 'peacock')**
- iii. **The He-Goat.**
- iv. **The unconquerable King.**

So much that man describes as great is often shoddy and unworthy of our notice. But everything that is connected with the Lord Jesus is mighty and majestic. We can worship Him with all our hearts and we shall find Him worthy. (Read **Revelation 5**)

Study 4

Life and Its End

Read

Proverbs chapter 4

We come to our final study in the Book of Proverbs. I hope you have enjoyed them and that you have begun to appreciate the value of this part of the Wisdom Literature in the Bible. One good way of applying the sayings you read is to see how they fit into the experiences of Bible characters. You will find, if you study the life of King Solomon, that many things he says here spring from his own life, spoken sometimes out of bitter experience. It was evident that the wrong kind of woman took him away from the Lord. Therefore, it is not surprising that in several places he warns about the dangers of immoral women, see for example **Proverbs 7**. Study then, the Book of Proverbs with Bible characters in mind. It will help to give practical force to your studies.

The Proverbs are true to life. They therefore say much about life – its course and its end. Frequently the things that are said are bound up with just natural life and the length of man's existence. Look at **verse 10** of our chapter – **"Hear, my son, and receive my sayings and the years of your life will be many"**.

To Jewish people especially, earthly prosperity, a large family and a long life, were evidence of God's blessing. So the writer is saying here that to listen to wise counsel is to lay the foundation for a successful life, which would last for many years. Compare **chapter 3: 16** with this. Here, it is not only length of days, but also riches and honour, which are in the hands of wisdom. We will also find the same ideas occurring in **Proverbs 3: 2; 9: 11 and 10: 27**. Therefore, when we read of 'life' in Proverbs it can mean it's **DURATION** – and with wisdom and the fear of the Lord, goes a long and happy one.

More important still is the way in which Proverbs tells us of the **QUALITY** of life. One of the most beautiful sayings is found in **Proverbs 19: 23** **"The fear of the Lord leads to life: and he who has it will abide in satisfaction; he will not be visited with evil."**

What better life could you desire than this? We can transfer the same ideas to our Christian experience and be very glad that this is the kind of life found in the Lord Jesus. It is interesting to notice the two metaphors used to illustrate life's quality, as wisdom and righteousness, become part of one's life.

First we read of a TREE OF LIFE.

In **Proverbs 3: 18** wisdom is a tree of life to those who lay hold on her and happiness comes in this way. The fruit of righteousness is said in **Proverbs 11: 30** to be a tree of life, and in **Proverbs 15: 4** the same is said to be true of a wholesome tongue. Using this illustration, we can say Proverbs teaches us that good qualities such as wisdom and righteousness grow and become more fruitful in a godly life.

We read, too, of a FOUNTAIN OF LIFE.

This is a great expression and suggests inexhaustible refreshment and power. **Proverbs 13: 14** says that **"the law of the wise is a fountain of life"**. It means that if we apply God's Word to our daily living we shall discover a force within us enabling us to do right things. Perhaps even more than this, just as fountains spring up and flow over, so out of our lives will flow those refreshing qualities which will be a blessing to others. We can see then how much the book of Proverbs says about life's true quality.

We also discover much about the DIRECTION of life.

Proverbs 6: 23 is very important indeed. **"The commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; reproofs of instruction are the way or life"**. God's Word leads us in the right direction. We can very clearly find the right way through life by obeying its directives. (Compare **Psalms 119: 105**) It will be a good exercise for you to go through Proverbs with the theme 'way' in mind and study all that is said about the different ways that exist. Twice over it is

said that there is a way which seems right unto a man, but the end of it is death, **Proverbs 14: 12** and **Proverbs 16: 25**. Yet **Proverbs 15: 24** tells us, according to one translation, that **"the way of life winds upwards for the wise."** We can study Proverbs with the certainty that it will give us much helpful instruction in finding the right way to life and living.

Finally, we find something about the END of life.

We will not find much in Proverbs about the life AFTER death, but the words 'death' and 'die' are used between 20 and 30 times. Death is always viewed as the enemy of life and often as the ultimate reward for folly and sin. I will leave you to look at this theme for yourself. As we close, just look at these two contrasting ideas. **"When a wicked man dies, his expectation will perish"**. (**11: 7**) How true this is! All his expectations, hopes and ambitions are all unfulfilled, but- **"The righteous has a refuge in his death."** (**14: 32**) – and so he has! If we are 'right with God', then Christ is our hope. What a ray of light this shines on the true secret of everlasting life! As believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, we can rejoice in the certainty of eternal life. Hope means security and peace, because we have life in Him.

Questions

Study 1: The Beauty of Friendship

1. How could some of the problems of a nation be overcome?
2. Give two ways in which Proverbs supports the second commandment. Give a reference for each.
3. 'True friendship is built upon faithfulness' Give one way in which we can put this into practice.
4. Explain, in your own words, the meaning of **Proverbs 27: 6**
5. a) How can we find the friendship of the Lord Jesus?
b) Give two qualities of His friendship that we can enjoy.

Study 2: The Influence of Words

1. 'It's a wise man that can master his tongue!' Comment on this statement in the light of today's lesson.
2. Give one verse in Proverbs which would link with Jesus' words in **Matthew 12: 34-35**, and explain why it does so.
3. Why should a Christian not exaggerate?
4. What is the idea behind the metaphor, **"A wholesome tongue is a tree of life?"** (**Proverbs 15: 4**)
5. What lesson have you learnt about the power of speech and the tongue from this study?

Study 3: A Group of Fours

1. What can we learn about Agur from **Proverbs 30: 1-6**?
2. What can we learn from his prayer in **verses 7-9**?
3. What is the teaching of **verses 11-14**?
4. a) What four things in this chapter are used to illustrate total dissatisfaction in life?
b) How can WE find satisfaction to the full?
5. Show from the New Testament references in our lesson, how the Lord Jesus was the complete opposite of the servant in **verse 22**.

Study 4: Life and its End

1. How did Jewish people measure God's blessing?
2. What does Proverbs say about the quality of life?
3. Write out a verse from Proverbs and a similar one from the Psalms which tell us how we know the right DIRECTION in life. Learn them both, with their references.
4. What view is taken of death in the Book of Proverbs?
5. What is the most important lesson you have learnt from your studies in Proverbs?