

## Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

### Episode 27

### The Bible's Literary Context: What is a Proverb? (Part 6 of 8-part series)

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### Summary

In the last podcast episode, we continued our series on studying the Bible in light of its various types of literature – its literary genres. We looked at parables and offered some guidelines for interpreting them. In this episode, we're going to briefly look at another familiar type of biblical literature that is at times badly misunderstood: the proverb.

### Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

In the last episode, we continued our series on studying the Bible in light of its various types of literature (its literary genres). Again, a genre is a kind of literature. We looked at parables last time and offered some guidelines for interpreting them. In this episode, we're going to briefly look at another familiar type of biblical literature that is (sad to say) at times badly misunderstood. That is the proverb.

It's probably best to start with what proverbs are. In a nutshell, proverbs are time-tested truths. They are axiomatic sayings that by-and-large are shown to be correct in life. That's why they're typically found in literature that is called "Wisdom Literature." The nature of a proverb is to dispense some sort of truism in a memorable way. Since they are, by definition, short and pithy sayings, their brevity doesn't provide space for addressing all the possible contingencies or exceptions to them that could arise. I like the way biblical scholars Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart put it very clearly and concisely when they wrote:

Proverbs are worded to be memorable, rather than to be technically precise.

If that's what proverbs are, then how are they misunderstood? How should we *not* look at proverbs? I would say that there are two fundamentally flawed perspectives that need attention in this regard. One would be that proverbs are not unconditional promises. Second, proverbs are not prophecies, either. In other words, proverbs bring with them no expectation of guaranteed outcomes. To read a biblical proverb and assume a guaranteed outcome (as though the statement

was a prophecy) is to take that proverb out of its literary context and, therefore, produce flawed and perhaps even damaging interpretation.

The true nature of proverbs versus their common misunderstandings is easy to illustrate in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. Let me give you a few examples. Proverbs 15:22 says:

**<sup>22</sup>Without counsel plans fail,  
but with many advisers they succeed.**

Well, is that *always* true? If you look out in the business world or a military engagement or something smaller like how I'm going to get through college... Pick any area of life where you can look at an outcome and whether it's either a success or a failure, is it guaranteed that every person's success on all occasions came about as a result of careful planning? Well, no. But for the most part, you would think that would be the case, and it probably is. The more advice you get, the more you think about that advice, the better the outcome will probably be because you put more thought into it. Again, the proverb is a truism. It's an axiom. It's something that's true most times in most places on most occasions--but not always. It's not guaranteed.

Let me give you another one. Proverbs 16:31:

**<sup>31</sup>Gray hair is a crown of glory;  
it is gained in a righteous life.**

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This one's obviously not true in terms of the numbers. It's obviously not true that anyone you meet with a gray head of hair is a righteous person. Again, that isn't the point of the proverb. If you understand that proverb in the way it's supposed to be understood (giving you some truism of life) and you put it back, especially into the biblical world, since the lifespan of people was a lot shorter than it is today... Since it was believed that you reached long life, you were old enough to get that gray head of hair (which wasn't terribly typical in a world where the average life span might have only been 40 or 50 years old)... Look at the colonial period here in the United States, in North America. Lifespans were into the 40's and 50's. If you got to the age where you had a good set of gray hair, the assumption was that God was blessing you--that through the providence of God you got to be that old. Again, it's a truism that fits its context, but it's not a scientific statement. It's not even a theological statement that's all-encompassing. But it reflects an idea that's very consistent and very understandable within the biblical world.

Another one: Proverbs 29:12:

**<sup>12</sup>If a ruler listens to falsehood,  
all his officials will be wicked.**

Really? Just because a leader listens to falsehood or is deceived... even if they listen to it deliberately... They just like it and so they go with advice that they know to not be true, but that doesn't mean that everyone who works for him is going to be wicked. Exhibit A: Daniel (in the book of Daniel), working for a number of pagan administrations. It's just not meant to be all-encompassing-- something that's always true in every situation at all times. But again, in general, for the most part, if a ruler listens to falsehood, his administration could turn out to be corrupt. It's a truism. It's just something that's mostly true that over the course of time would bear out to be true in most circumstances. It's good piece of advice.

One more: Proverbs 29:16:

**<sup>16</sup>When the wicked increase, transgression increases,  
but the righteous will look upon their downfall.**

Well, we all know that it's not a given (it's not a universal) that Christians (believers, the righteous) who are in situations where they're ruled by wicked rulers... It's not a given that the circumstance is going to turn around in their lifetime--in the lifetime of the righteous. The righteous may not get to see vindication in this life. Again, the proverb itself is not making some sort of universal theological statement or universal statement about reality. A proverb is a short, pithy saying that either dispenses advice or gives you some sort of axiomatic truth that over the course of time, more chances than not, it's going to turn out that way.

Perhaps the most well-known example of how important it is to understand the nature of a proverb is Proverbs 22:6. You may have it memorized. I'm sure you've heard of it. It says:

**<sup>6</sup>Train up a child in the way he should go;  
even when he is old he will not depart from it.**

Treating this proverb as though it is an unconditional promise or a prophecy (something with a guaranteed outcome) has given more anguish to more people, I think, than probably any other verse in the book of Proverbs. We all know situations where we have faithful believers who have made a good-faith attempt (in some cases, an *extraordinary*) attempt to get their children to follow them in their faith, and they just don't. The children, either through immaturity or rebellion, just go their own way. They stray. In some cases, they come back and other times they don't. There's a certain randomness to that. You look at this verse and if you're looking at a proverb as though it's supposed to have some guaranteed outcome, it's very natural to look at yourself as a parent and beat yourself up over it. "Oh, if I had only made them read their Bible ten more minutes per day, it would've been different. Oh, if I had prayed for them X number of times per day or at a certain time of day for a certain number of days in a row, things would've

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been different." Again, you're left puzzling and anguishing over the fact that you didn't quite get the right formula or you didn't quite do something so that the magic would work. Or, even worse, you didn't quite do something so that God would've looked down at your child and said, "Well, I'm going to open that person's heart. I'm going to steer them in a direction and bring them back. I would do that if only you (Mr. or Mrs. Parent) would just do this other thing, just this precise way. Then I could bless you and your kid." That's just a self-torture that's completely unnecessary and, frankly, completely unbiblical. It stems from a flawed mindset that ignores the literary context of what you're looking at in your Bible.

I hope this short foray into the nature of proverbs is in some way helpful. Again, we do the Bible an injustice when we fail to take it for what it is or simply refuse to do so if it doesn't suit our own beliefs or traditions. Proverbs can quite easily be distorted so as to manipulate people, and they ought not to be used to harm someone emotionally or crush our own spirit. Until next time...