

Set Your Sails in the Right Direction

Proverbs 21: A Guide to Sovereign Wisdom and Heartfelt Obedience

Key Theme: Navigate life by God's guardrails—balancing sovereignty, responsibility, and wise diligence.

1) God is Still Sovereign, No Matter the Decision Man Makes (vv. 1, 30-31)

He puts up "**guardrails**" and allows decisions in between them—think of how the river banks direct the water without controlling what every droplet does.

- **Job 38:11** shows God's control in a "control of water" sort of way, as well as setting up national boundaries, etc.
- He controls the limits and uses **reins (and reigns)** to direct the hearts back and forth, but seems to allow a high level of choice within.

Recall from "Decision Making": God works through three main "P's"

- **Proclamations** – His commands
 - **Patterns** – How He lays things out, giving us some leeway on how closely we follow
 - **Passions** – What He loves. Someone truly following after God will love what He loves and try to follow it, whether commanded or not.
-

2) Whether You Think You're Doing the Right Thing or Not (You'll Often Excuse Bad Choices), Know That God's "Double-Checking" the Heart-State (vv. 2, 27)

- **Hence: Guard the heart with all diligence** (*Prov. 4:23*)
 - **Heart is deceitful** and needs to be guarded (and guarded against) (*Jer. 17:9*)
-

3) Right Actions Are Those That Align with God, Not Those That Require the Most "Sacrifice" (vv. 3, 27)

- Think of Saul sparing Agag and the sheep so he'd have "**more sacrifice**" to give, when God simply wanted "**simple**" (**unwrinkled**) **obedience** (*1 Sam. 15*).
- Surrender to God and let Him make those choices to prosper or not.

4) Even Good Actions and Decisions, When Driven by Pride and Arrogance, Displease the Lord (v. 4)

Selah Moment: Pause and Reflect

Take a moment to see what we've seen so far:

- **God's in control**, but He leads like a river is led by the two banks (*sovereignty*).
- **Man is responsible** to obey God, but obeying God with a wrong or arrogant attitude is still displeasing (*responsibility*).
- **Man will justify almost any action** he does, so we need to take a moment and assess the heart, which we admit is very deceitful (*Psalms 119* will give the battle plan for that) (*caution against self-justification*).

The rest of the Proverb is going to unpack these concepts and expand on them (sometimes restating directly or "remixing" them with illustrations).

Guiding Principles:

- Start and end at **Sovereignty**.
- Keep a **pure heart** throughout.
- Work as if it depends on you, but know that **success is measured by the length of our obedience**, not our "progress."

Reflection Question: Where in your life right now are you excusing a decision?

5) It's Okay to Seek "Plenty" (4-22)

- **Beware of the arrogance and "driver" attitude** that can be used to "climb the ladder" (v. 4). *Prosperity does not mean presence.*
- **Beware of deceit and manipulation** to "get ahead" (v. 6). *Manipulation does not equal ministry.*
- **Don't resort to taking by force** what God has not given (v. 7). *Open hand, not closed fist.*
 - *Note: The robbery isn't always in a back alley; it can be by withholding justice (think of a bribe and perverting justice for personal gain) (see vv. 13-14 for more on this).*
- Even when seeking success, be careful not to be **"driven" (like dumb, driven cattle)** by the **"love of money"** (vv. 16-22).
 - You can seek to gain it for the obvious reasons you'd gain money (it is useful!), but you can't make it the end-all, be-all, or else you fall into many hurtful lusts (vv. 16-18).
- **Wisdom and money are both defenses** against what's coming; getting wisdom is better (vv. 21-22; *Eccl. 7:12*). *Wisdom finds the backdoor that greed paid for.*
- **vv. 17-20** deal with **"waiting for the good thing"** (rather than rushing in now):

- vv. 17, 20 – *"The Richest Man in Babylon"* sets aside now so he has later, rather than indulging instantaneously. You have and make more than you think... but you spend it when you shouldn't.
 - v. 18 – The **godly person will be more valued** than the wicked. *"Good name better to choose than great riches."*
 - v. 19 – The dangers of a **"trophy wife"** (more to this later).
-

6) Wisdom Is Always Better Because It Will Help Figure Out the "Time and Place" for "There's a Time and Place for Everything" (vv. 11-16, 23-30)

- A **pure heart** keeps those guardrails up (vv. 11-12).
- A **compassionate heart** keeps the ears tender (v. 13).
- Sometimes a **gift at the right time** can **"break the heart"** (v. 14).
 - *Eccl. 7:7* can be used for good or bad (*A gift destroys the heart*).
- **Good actions should produce joy** in good men (v. 15). *"They that serve, do it well"* (*Rom. 12:1-8*).
- Those who **leave the right way** will find only trouble (those who stay will find trouble, but there is a **sustaining that God gives**, as opposed to a "turning His face away") (v. 16).
 - *Matt. 7:24-27* – (Wise man and foolish man both face the same storms. One has a foundation and the other does not.)
 - *Job 5:7* – Man is born unto grief either way, but **the way of the transgressor is hard**.
 - *Isa. 53:3* – Jesus is a man acquainted with grief. **Wisdom doesn't prevent grief... but it prevents unnecessary grief**. You might twist an ankle, but at least you didn't step on the rake (*Prov. 13:15*).

Rapid-Fire Examples of "Right Time and Place":

- **Time to talk and time to not** (v. 23).
 - **Anger has a place, wrath does not** (v. 24).
 - **Desire is good**, but has to be accompanied by hard work (v. 25).
 - **Gain is good** when accompanied by generosity (v. 26).
 - **Sacrifice is good**, when done with a pure heart (v. 27).
 - **Speaking is good**, when done honestly (v. 28).
 - *This one's a bit more difficult to unpack* – Contrast **"liar" with "hearer"**: As in, there are those who can't stop "telling tales." A "hearer" will pause and listen, then be heard; a liar will keep spewing and eventually be ignored. Think: *"Boy who cried wolf was heard, but was ignored when it mattered most."*
 - **Being "strong" is good**, unless it's in opposition to the Lord (vv. 29-30).
-

7) End Where You Began (Not a Checklist, a List of Reminders and "Re-Adjustments") (vv. 30-31)

The **"godly"** are those who consider God's take on things every step of the way.

Can be summed up two ways:

- **Wisdom and counsel come from the Lord** (so seek it there).
- **Safety in preparation comes from the Lord** (so remember while you prepare).

We still have to study and we still have to prepare—but it's only **"successful"** if God's hand is in it.

Remember:

- *Success in God's eyes is obedience.*
- *Success in man's eyes is overcoming the enemy.*

Application Challenge: This week, measure one decision by obedience, not outcomes.

A Psalm of Life

By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem. Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul. Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day. Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave. In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife! Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,—act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead! Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time; Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again. Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.*