

# Proverbs, Rewards And Prosperity

## Helping the poor under the Mosaic Law

In the Book of Proverbs, there are numerous verses which refer to God rewarding those who help the poor. For example, Proverbs 19:17 says: ***“He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given.”*** In Hebrew, the phrase “pay back” is “shalam” which means “recompense, reward”.<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 28:7-8 declares: ***“Whoever keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons shames his father. One who increases his possessions by usury and extortion gathers it for him who will pity the poor.”*** Proverbs 28:27 states: ***“He who gives to the poor will not lack, but he who hides his eyes will have many curses.”***

The above three verses are based on the Mosaic Covenant commands found in Deuteronomy 15:7-8: ***“If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs.”*** Proverbs 28:7-8 quoted above relates also to the Mosaic Law commands of not charging interest on loans to the poor or to fellow Israelites (see Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35-38 and Deuteronomy 23:17-20). Charging interest on loans to such people was called the sin of usury.

Proverbs 11:24-26 and 22:9 either refer to similar Mosaic Law principles or are good generalisations such as those mentioned in the following section. Proverbs 11:24-26 says: ***“There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself. The people will curse him who withholds grain, but blessing will be on the head of him who sells it.”*** Proverbs 22:9 says: ***“He who has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor.”***

In context, Proverbs 11:24-26 relates to being generous in one’s business dealings and to not withholding crops of grain from the market in order to inflate prices dramatically. Proverbs 22:9 relates only to helping the poor or needy.<sup>2</sup>

## Be cautious and wise when interpreting verses from Proverbs

There are many Christians who base most of the ideas about rewards, prosperity and blessings on verses from the Book of Proverbs. It is right to use these verses as a *part* of the full counsel of God about such matters. But we need to be very cautious and wise about using these verses from Proverbs. There are *two* reasons for this.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 1022.

<sup>2</sup> It is a sin when some wealthy American television preachers use Proverbs 11:24-26 and 22:9 to teach that God promises to give great riches to those who give large sums of money to these same preachers. These verses relate to helping the poor and not rich preachers.

First the Book of Proverbs contains numerous verses which are based on the *deserved rewards* and *punishments* principles of the *Law of Moses interspersed* with verses based on *God's grace* and *faith*.

God's grace or "hen" in Hebrew is mentioned in Proverbs 3:4, 3:22, 3:34 and 4:9. God's mercy or lovingkindness or "hesed" in Hebrew is referred to in Proverbs 3:3, 14:22, 16:6 and 28:13. Trusting God is mentioned in Proverbs 3:5, 16:20, 22:19, 28:25, 29:25 and 30:5.

But the Law of Moses is mentioned in Proverbs 3:1, 4:2, 6:23, 7:2, 13:14, 28:4 (twice), 28:7, 28:9 and 29:18. Proverbs 28:7 says: "**Whoever keeps the law is a discerning son...**" Proverbs 29:18 states: "**...but happy is he who keeps the law.**" Proverbs 7:2 declares: "**Keep my commands and live, and my law as the apple of your eye.**" Proverbs 3:1-2 teaches that obedience to the Mosaic Law's commands merits the reward of long life and peace.

The commandments of the Mosaic Law are mentioned in Proverbs 2:1, 3:1, 4:4, 6:23, 7:1, 7:2, 13:13 and 19:16. Proverbs 7:1-3 says: "**My son, keep my words, and treasure my commands within you. Keep my commands and live, and my law as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.**" The reference here to binding the commands of God's Law on their fingers relates to the Mosaic Law principle found in Deuteronomy 6:8.

The principle of "**Keep my commands and live**" in Proverbs 7:2 is the Mosaic Law principle found in Leviticus 18:5 and commented upon by Paul in Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12. Proverbs 19:16 refers to a similar Mosaic Law principle: "**He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul, but he who is careless of his ways will die.**"

Proverbs 4:2 commands Mosaic Covenant believers: "**Do not forsake my law**". This command *does not apply to New Covenant Gentile believers* because they are not under the Mosaic Covenant and Law.

In Proverbs 28:9, God reveals that He regarded as abominations the prayers of those living under the Mosaic Covenant who refused to hear and obey His Law: "**One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination.**"

## **Some truths in Proverbs are good generalisations**

Secondly the Book of Proverbs contains some verses which are truths in the sense of *good generalisations*. These are *principles* which are *generally true*. But different verses in other Biblical Books show there are *exceptions* to the general rules presented in these verses in Proverbs.

This does not mean that the majority of verses in Proverbs are generalisations though. We can only be sure a verse in Proverbs is a generalisation if there are other verses in the Bible which show there are exceptions to the truth stated in the generalisation.

There are verses in the Book of Proverbs which are more than good generalisations or truths which apply only in some or many situations. The following truths apply in *all* circumstances. Proverbs 3:11-12 says: "**My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest His correction; for whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights.**" Proverbs 15:3 states: "**The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.**" Proverbs 15:16 declares: "**Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure with trouble.**" Proverbs 11:1, 12:1, 16:32, 17:1 and 21:27 are other examples of truths which apply in *all* relevant situations.

Here is a list of good generalisations in the Book of Proverbs: Proverbs 3:1-2, 4:10, 10:27, 11:8, 11:10 (first half), 14:20 (first half), 14:23 (first half), 15:22, 16:7, 17:27, 18:22, 22:11, 28:13, 28:22 and 29:2.

Proverbs 3:1-2 and 4:10 promise that those who obey the Mosaic Law and God's commandments will live long lives. But note there are Biblical exceptions to this. King Josiah and John the Baptist were extremely obedient to God, but Josiah died at age 39 and John the Baptist at 31 years (see 2 Kings 22:1-23:30 [especially 23:25] and Matthew 11:11).

Proverbs 11:10 states: ***"When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices..."*** There are some Biblical exceptions to this. At different times in history, most people in Jerusalem did not want the righteous to experience good things. An example of the righteous were God's Old Testament prophets. The people of Jerusalem mostly persecuted these Old Testament prophets (see 2 Chronicles 24:20-21, 36:15-16 and Acts 23:37). Also most of the people of Jerusalem wanted Jesus Christ to be murdered (see Luke 23:13-25 and Acts 4:27-28) and persecuted the Apostle Paul (see Acts Chapters 22-24).

Proverbs 14:20 declares: ***"The poor man is hated even by his own neighbor..."*** God commands Christians to love their neighbours including the poor (see Matthew 22:39). God told Mosaic Covenant believers to love their neighbours (see Leviticus 19:18). So if poor people lived next to Mosaic or New Covenant believers who obeyed God about loving their neighbours, Proverbs 14:20 would not apply in their cases.

Proverbs 14:23 says: ***"In all labor there is profit..."*** Deuteronomy 28:39 and Isaiah 17:10-11 are exceptions to this. Proverbs 15:22 declares: ***"Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counselors they are established."*** But note when David listened to his counselors, he got out of God's will and as a result, Uzzah died needlessly (see 1 Chronicles 13:1-10).

Proverbs 17:27 says: ***"He who has knowledge spares his words..."*** But note Proverbs 17:28 is an exception to the above.

Proverbs 18:22 states: ***"He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord."*** But Proverbs 19:13 and 21:9 reveal that not all wives are blessings.

Proverbs 16:7 states: ***"When a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him."*** The lives of Elijah, Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus are exceptions to this. Their ways, especially Christ's pleased the Lord. But their enemies did not make peace with them, but continually persecuted them.

Proverbs 22:11 declares: ***"He who loves purity of heart and has grace on his lips, the king will be his friend."*** But note many of the Old Testament prophets loved purity of heart and had grace on their lips but were hated by various evil kings of Judah and Israel.

Proverbs 29:2 says: ***"When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people groan."*** An obvious exception to this generalisation is Moses. While he was in authority over the Israelites, they rarely if ever rejoiced and constantly complained and moaned about his leadership (see Exodus 14:11-12, 16:1-3, 17:1-3, Numbers 12:1-2, 14:1-4, 16:1-41, 20:1-5 and 21:4-5).

Good generalisations are *not errors*. They are similar to approximations in mathematics. If I say there are 2 million people in a city, my approximation is not an error. This is even though the exact figure may be 2,001,231 people. Many times, the Bible uses approximated figures but these are not errors (see Exodus 12:37, 32:38, 2 Chronicles 28:6, 28:8, Jonah 4:11, Matthew 5:13, 6:44, 8:9, Luke 9:14, John 6:10, Acts 2:41 and 4:4).

## The Proverbs are not all universal rules

Because the Book of Proverbs contains some generalisations, New Covenant believers are being very unwise if they treat all verses in Proverbs as *universal rules* which *have no exceptions*. Also, because the Book of Proverbs includes numerous verses which relate to the Mosaic Covenant and Law, New Covenant believers are very naive if they take every verse in Proverbs to have direct application to their lives today. This is why we must interpret with great caution verses like Proverbs 3:9-10, 11:24-26 and 22:4.

As originally written, every verse in the Book of Proverbs is fully inspired by God. But the Book of Proverbs needs to be interpreted with the sort of wisdom from God required in interpreting the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes. The latter can be easily misinterpreted.

## The consequences of humility and the fear of the Lord

Proverbs 22:4 states: ***“By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honor and life.”*** In Hebrew, the word ***“by”*** here is ***“eqeb”***. The King James Version and the New King James Version translate ***“eqeb”*** here in the sense of ***“as a consequence”*** or ***“as a result of”***. They do not translate ***“eqeb”*** specifically in the sense of a reward here. But note the New American Standard Bible translates ***“eqeb”*** as ***“The reward of”***. The difference in translation is because the word ***“eqeb”*** generally means ***“consequence of, because”***<sup>3</sup> but can specifically mean ***“reward”***.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, it is highly debatable whether ***“eqeb”*** refers in Proverbs 22:4 to:

- a *totally deserved reward* for obedience to the Law of Moses. Only Jesus Christ has obeyed the Law in this sense (see Matthew 5:17). Christ had perfect humility (see Matthew 11:29 and Philippians 2:8) and perfect fear of God (see Hebrews 5:7).
- a *partially deserved reward* for the obedience in the lives of those who have humbled themselves in turning from their sins and have begun to have fear or respect and awe of God. Such partially deserved rewards *are undergirded by God’s grace* to repentant sinners. In different ways Leviticus 26:40-45, Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and 30:1-10 relate to this.
- a *totally gracious consequence* of a Holy Spirit-inspired humility and fear of the Lord.

Also like many verses in the Book of Proverbs, Proverbs 22:4 is a good generalisation which has numerous exceptions. There have been numerous believers throughout history who have had humility and fear of the Lord, but have not received riches and honour in this earthly life.

## Using the verses in Proverbs unwisely

One example of a person using the Book of Proverbs unwisely occurred at a recent large pastors’ conference in Australia. One of the main speakers made the following condemnatory statement: *“By the way the only people who don’t prosper are sinners, lazy people and fools – which one are you? Sinners, sluggards and fools are the only poor folks in the Book of Proverbs.”*

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<sup>3</sup> Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 691 and “Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 784.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 784.

These comments reveal a poor understanding of the nature of the Book of Proverbs. Also note this speaker did not acknowledge the many verses in the Bible which do not fit into his limited understanding of Biblical prosperity.

#### Bible Study Questions

1. Explain the two reasons why we have to be very careful and wise when using verses from the Proverbs about rewards, prosperity and blessings.
2. Give 6 examples of verses in Proverbs which have Biblical exceptions to the general truths they teach.