

PROVERBS

Chapter 21

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will. 2 Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart. 3 To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice. 4 Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin. 5 The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty. 6 The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death. 7 The violence of the wicked will sweep them away, because they refuse to do what is just. 8 The way of the guilty is crooked, but the conduct of the pure is upright. 9 It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. 10 The soul of the wicked desires evil; his neighbor finds no mercy in his eyes. 11 When a scoffer is punished, the simple becomes wise; when a wise man is instructed, he gains knowledge. 12 The Righteous One observes the house of the wicked; he throws the wicked down to ruin. 13 Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered. 14 A gift in secret averts anger, and a concealed bribe, strong wrath. 15 When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers. 16 One who wanders from the way of good sense will rest in the assembly of the dead. 17 Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich. 18 The wicked is a ransom for the righteous, and the traitor for the upright. 19 It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman. 20 Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it. 21 Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life, righteousness, and honor. 22 A wise man scales the city of the mighty and brings down the stronghold in which they trust. 23 Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. 24 "Scoffer" is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride. 25 The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. 26 All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back. 27 The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with evil intent. 28 A false witness will perish, but the word of a man who hears will endure. 29 A wicked man puts on a bold face, but the upright gives thought to his ways. 30 No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD. 31 The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.

21:1–22:16 Describes the Lord's control over both wise and foolish people. (TLSB)

21:1 *king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD.* God controls the lives and actions even of kings, such as Nebuchadnezzar (Da 4:31–32, 35) and Cyrus (Isa 45:1–3; cf. Ezr 6:22). (CSB)

turns it ... wherever he will. A stream of water has no mind of its own. In the hand of the Lord, even a king's thoughts are like water in an irrigation canal, which farmers can divert into the channels they select. However, we are not to blame God for the abuse of power. But neither are we to despair that wicked people are in control, thinking that God's hand is not at work. The specifics of His work remain hidden, and the atrocities perpetrated seem confounding. Yet even through rulers like Pharaoh, God is glorified (Ex 14:4) and His will is done. (TLSB)

As the Lord controls nature with its rivers and streams, so He controls human affairs, including the dealings of mighty kings. The word “watercourse” could also refer to irrigation canals that farmers dig to control the flow of water into their fields. In that case, we would understand the proverb: As farmers control their irrigation channels, so God controls... Through the Persian King Cyrus, God saw to it that His people Israel were returned to their homeland from their exile in Babylon. Through the Lord’s planning, the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus held a worldwide census, and Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem as God had promised. Even the heathen King Nebuchadnezzar had to admit about the Lord Most High, “He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to Him: ‘What have you done?’” (Daniel 4:35) (PBC)

21:2 *weighs the heart*. See Job 31:6; Ps 139:23; 1Co 4:4–5; Heb 4:12. (CSB)

Cf Dn 5:27. The Egyptian Book of the Dead uses similar imagery. (TLSB)

This verse is almost exactly the same as Proverbs 16:2. Proverbs 16:2 spoke of motivation; this one speaks of the heart. By stating the same truth in slightly different wording, God brings home His teachings. On Judgment Day, God “will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts” (1 Corinthians 4:5). He weighs the hearts, seeing whether they have faith or unbelief. (PBC)

21:3 *more acceptable ... than sacrifice*. A theme also found in the prophets (Hos 6:6; Mic 6:7–8). (CSB)

Cf Ps 40:6; Is 1:10–17; Am 5:21–24. Outward ceremonies as such are not useless; sacrificial offerings of various kinds were required by the Law of Moses. We lay on God’s altar the sacrifice of self-will and the offering of wholehearted consecration. Cf Ps 51:16–17; Jer 6:20; 7:22–23; Hos 6:6. True worship does not begin with giving to God but with receiving from Him in humble faith. Then we live in fervent love toward one another, esp toward those in need (Mi 6:8; Jas 1:27). (TLSB)

This verse repeats almost verbatim the words of the Prophet Samuel to Saul, the first king of Israel. Saul had disobeyed God and then tried to cover up by saying he was going to offer a sacrifice to the Lord (1 Samuel 15:22). The outward rite of sacrifice could not gloss over an unbelieving, disobedient heart. Similarly, for us to put large amounts of money in the church offering plate will not be God-pleasing, if we are living in un-repentant sin. (PBC)

21:4 *Haughty eyes*. Haughty eyes (along with a sinful heart) indicate the darkness of sin within a person. To a degree, then we can see into a person through his eyes. (PBC)

lamp. Eyes (see Lk 11:34). (CSB)

Some Hbr manuscripts read “land ready to be farmed.” Pride and arrogance are sin, producing a wicked harvest and leading down blind paths. (TLSB)

In line with this verse, Jesus said, “Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness” (Luke 11:34-35). The Bible seems to speak of the eyes as a lamp that shine two ways – both into the body and out from the body. If your spiritual eyes are bad, they are not bringing any light into one’s soul. Moreover, if one is

full of darkness inside, no light will shine out from the eyes. (PBC) – The saying “there is nobody home” of a person might apply here.

21:5 *hasty*. Either rash actions (19:2) or a desire to get rich quick. (CSB)

Our saying, “Haste makes waste,” is similar to this proverb. (PBC)

21:6 *fleeting vapor*. This refers to a breath, as when we see our breath on a cold day, and it quickly disappears. (PBC)

deadly snare. Cf. 5:22; 7:23. (CSB)

21:7 *violence of the wicked will sweep them away*. Just as lies of the deceitful eventually will come back to haunt them, so will violence turn back upon the wicked. (PBC)

21:8 *pure is upright* – The word translated as upright has the base meaning of “straight.” An upright person is one who walks a straight line. Because he is following God’s direction rather than his own whims, the upright walks a straight path. With this in mind, we can make the psalmist David’s prayer our own, “Teach me your way, O Lord; lead me in a straight path” (Psalm 27:11) (PBC)

21:9 *in a corner of the housetop*. Roofs were flat, and small rooms could be built there (see Dt 22:8; 2Ki 4:10). (CSB)

Lonely and cramped space in which to live. This verse is repeated at 25:24. Cf 21:19. Flat roofs were common in the ancient world, and people often slept on them when weather permitted. Constant exposure to the elements—mild or severe—is preferable to living in a house where the storms of bickering are always brewing. While limited separation may be necessary in a troubled marriage, this proverb underscores both the importance of living at peace with one another (2Co 13:11) and the self-sacrifice and patience spouses may need to exercise for the sake of the union. (TLSB)

quarrelsome wife. Moreover, if it seems that the quarrelsome wife is singled out, we need to remember that the vast majority of proverbs described wicked men. (PBC)

21:10 *desires evil*. The wicked man thinks first, and last, of his personal advantage. He has no time for mercy toward others. The wickedness can become more than a weakness; it can develop into an actual craving. (PBC)

21:11 This repeats the thought of Proverbs 19:25. The simple can learn, although the motivation for that learning may not be ideal. When he sees the mocker being punished, fear of receiving the same punishment may be what makes the simple wiser. This is partly what we mean when we speak of the moral law serving as a curb to prevent the widespread outbreak of evil. (PBC)

instructed...knowledge – *saw-kal'* A primitive root; to be (causeatively *make* or *act*) *circumspect* and hence *intelligent*:—consider, expert, instruct, prosper, (deal) prudent (-ly), (give) skill (-ful), have good success, teach, (have, make to) understand (-ing), wisdom, (be, behave self, consider, make) wise (-ly), guide wittingly. (QV)

knowledge – *dah'-ath* *knowledge*:—cunning, know(-ledge), awares (wittingly). (QV)

21:12 *Righteous One*. Cf. Job 34:17. (CSB)

house of the wicked ... to ruin. In bringing the wicked to ruin, God often brings the entire household or family down with the wicked person himself. The point is that wicked people often bring disaster not only on themselves but on their household as well, especially when the family follows in the way of the wickedness. (PBC)

21:13 *cry of the poor*. God has been so merciful to us. How can we turn our backs on the cries of those who need our help? (PBC)

not be answered. Cf. the fate of the rich man (Lk 16:19–31) and the unmerciful servant (Mt 18:23–34). (CSB)

Those who refuse to listen to the cries of the poor will someday be in the same situation. (PBC)

21:14 *gift ... bribe*. Cf 17:23. Does not endorse bribery but points out the effectiveness of worldly and sinful methods, which God’s people should not encourage (Rm 12:1–2). (TLSB)

Without condoning the use of gifts as bribes, Solomon has shown that it is a way of life in this sinful world. In many countries today, bribes are almost part of government workers’ salaries – to get an extension on a passport, to get out of speeding ticket, to get favors in general. (PBC)

averts anger. Perhaps that of an offended party (see 6:34–35). (CSB)

A gift might soothe someone’s anger, but the wise person avoids unnecessary conflict in the first place. (PBC)

21:15 *joy to the righteous*. St Paul spoke of the same phenomenon in his famous passage on the role of government: “For rulers hold no terror for those who do right. But for those who do wrong” (Romans 13:3). (PBC)

21:16 Graphically illustrated by the man who succumbed to the adulteress (see 2:18; 5:23; 7:22–23; 9:18). (CSB)

The fact is that the disobedient get the opposite of what they expect. Instead of freedom of movement, he “comes to ser.” Instead of a fuller life, he ends up “in the company of the dead.” This is not just physical death, but spiritual death and, unless repented of, eternal death. (PBC)

21:17 *wine and oil*. Both were associated with lavish feasting (see 23:20–21; Am 6:6). Oil was used in various lotions or perfumes, some of which were very expensive (Jn 12:5). (CSB)

Wine and oil are symbolic of luxury and leisure, by which many people ruin themselves. While all good gifts come from God, we are to use them in moderation, to God’s glory, and in service to others. (TLSB)

When we seek first the things of God, He will give us contentment, satisfaction, and blessings here on earth as “frosting on the cake.” (PBC)

21:18 *The wicked is a ransom for the righteous.* Close to the thought of 11:8. In Isa 43:3–4 God gave three nations to Persia in exchange for Persia’s willingness to release the exiles of Judah. (CSB)

Cf Is 43:3, where the catastrophes inflicted on the Egyptians are said to be the ransom that freed Israel from slavery. (TLSB)

21:19 This is similar to verse 9, except that in this passage Solomon says it would be better “to live in a desert,” instead of simply a corner of the roof. There is an obvious increase in intensity. (PBC)

21:20 *wise – khaw-kawm'* From H2449; *wise*, (that is, intelligent, skilful or artful):—cunning (man), subtil, ([un-]), *wise* ([hearted], man). (QV)

Because wise people do not squander their money on “pleasure” (v 17), they always have on hand a store of things their family desires for comfort. (TLSB)

oil. Olive oil. (CSB)

A staple in Near Eastern households, it also served to make life pleasant (Ps 104:15). (TLSB)

When wisdom is our priority, other blessings come as well. (PBC)

21:21 *life, righteousness and honor.* Benefits for those who seek wisdom. (CSB)

This verse points out that the wise man’s heart is not with those possessions. It’s with the spiritual values of righteousness and love. The rest is secondary. (PBC)

21:22 *wise man ... brings down the stronghold.* Probably another way of saying, “Wisdom is better than strength” (Ecc 9:16). Cf. 24:5; 2Co 10:4, where spiritual weapons “have divine power to demolish strongholds.” (CSB)

As far as God is concerned, wisdom is superior to physical strength. This wisdom includes mental, but especially moral strength. (PBC)

21:23 Because wise people trust in God and not in their own strength, they are careful in their speech. (PBC)

21:24 *“scoffer” is the name.* God mocks and punishes him for his “overweening pride” (cf. 3:34; 19:25, 29; 21:11). (CSB)

While the wise “guards his mouth,” the proud rushes right in. He boasts, scoffs at things holy, and behaves in an overbearing way. (PBC)

21:25 *desire of the sluggard.* Because sluggards desire always to be at ease, they die of privation (6:6–11; 19:24; 26:13–16). (TLSB)

The sluggard craves for a life of ease. Because all he does is sit around and dream of the easy life, he gets no work done. Not having done any work, he doesn’t have food and ends up starving. (PBC)

21:26 *gives and does not hold back.* The righteous are prosperous, so they can share with those in need (see Ps 37:26; 112:9; cf. Eph 4:28). (CSB)

The righteous are filled with energy for doing good. Not only do they provide for themselves, but they generously give to others as well! (PBC)

21:27 *The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination.* It is an abomination to offer a sacrifice to God in hope of gaining His favor. Apart from faith, nothing is pleasing to God (Heb 11:6). Condemned is all worship that is done hypocritically or in an effort to appease God (Ps 50:9–23), to gain the praises of others (Mt 6:1–2), or heedless of our need for repentance and forgiveness (Mt 5:23–24). (TLSB)

A picture that might immediately come to mind is that of modern politicians who visit one church after another to win votes, when their personal morality and convictions are far removed from anything the churches stand for. (PBC)

21:28 *false witness will perish.* A wise person listens to advice, follows it, and is able to speak words worth remembering. (PBC)

21:29 *bold face.* Cf. the behavior of the adulteress in 7:13. (CSB)

Literally “he hardens his face.” The wicked has no choice but to put on a mask of false bravado. Their conscience accuses them. The righteous does not need to put on any front. He thoughtfully considers God’s will and confidently follows that way. (PBC)

21:30 *wisdom – hokmah –* The most frequently used word for wisdom and refers to practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is the chief concept in Proverbs. (PBC)

no understanding – to-boo-naw’ – intelligence; by implication an *argument*; by extension *caprice*:—discretion, reason, skillfulness, understanding, wisdom.(QV)

no counsel can avail against the LORD. Because he is sovereign and controls people and nations. (CSB)

Pharaoh could not keep God’s people from leaving Egypt. The Roman emperors tried to stamp out the early Christian church through persecutions, only to see it grow stronger. Worldly philosophers such as Voltaire, Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell scoffed at the Bible, but could never disprove it. (PBC)

21:31 *horse.* Many times God cautions against trusting in horses and chariots for victory (e.g., Ps 20:7; Hos 1:7; cf. Dt 17:16). (CSB)

Used for war, not farming or travel. (TLSB)

victory belongs to the LORD. See 1Sa 17:47; Ps 3:8. (CSB)

Outcomes of human conflict are guided by the Lord. Luther: “Histories are nothing else than a demonstration, recollection, and sign of divine action and judgment, how He upholds, rules, obstructs, prospers, punishes, and honors the world, and especially men, each according to his just desert, evil or good” (AE 34:275–76). (TLSB)

Mighty empires of day gone by, with their war horses and chariots, have come and gone. It is foolish to trust in anything or anyone but the Lord. (PBC)