

## Dr. August Konkell, Proverbs, Session 12

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Welcome to a session on Proverbs. We are looking at the book of Proverbs. This is session 12, the Tree of Life, Proverbs chapters 10 through 15.

Welcome to a session on Proverbs. We are looking at the collection of Solomon, which begins in Proverbs chapter 10, verse 1. And we have observed some of the antithetical Proverbs that constitute chapters 10 through 15 of this collection of 375 Proverbs. There's another motif that appears in these Proverbs, which we have already been introduced to.

Wisdom is a tree of life. Those who take hold of her are blessed. That means these are the ones who are the kind of person who hold the values that are approved by God.

This is the way that we are to live. That's what blessed means in this context. But there are several other Proverbs in this collection of Solomon that use the motif of a tree of life.

Now, I first of all just wanted to make the point that the idea of a tree representing life is not one that is unique to the Bible or one that is unique to Israel. We find that idea of a tree of life most commonly in what the Bible calls the Asherah. Asherah is most often associated with the god Baal.

And in the Baal mythology, Asherah is the consort of Baal or the female associate of the god Baal. But in cultic representation, Asherah is a tree. In many translations, it's made to be a pole.

But in several references, it's very clear that what was represented was a live tree. This is true in the story of Gideon, where he cuts down his father's Asherah. And it's true in Deuteronomy, which forbids worship under any tree which is an Asherah.

And the Greek translation always translates Asherah as a tree, a living tree. And this tree is represented in various symbols. It is, of course, in the symbolism of the temple, where it is etched in the engravings that Solomon has in the temple.

But we find it in other cult shrines as well. And more recently, there has been a shrine discovered at a place called Kutilit Erud. This is not too far from Kadesh Barnea.

It is in the Sinai Peninsula. And it is on kind of a major trade route or travel route that extends down towards Eden and the Gulf of Aqaba. This very famous cult site also has had fragments left of some of its symbols.

And one of them is a broken pot, a potsherd, in which we have a picture of an Asherah. And this is said to be an Asherah of Yahweh. And, of course, associated with it also are the lion and the ibexes, who are representative of life, as is the tree.

So, the idea that a tree represents life and that a tree can rejuvenate even after it's been cut down is one that is very common. So, this becomes then a metaphor that there are certain things that generate and represent life. The first of these we find in Proverbs 11, verse 30.

And what we read here in Proverbs 11, verse 30, is that the fruit of righteousness is a tree of life. And then the second half of it is a little more tricky to understand. But, as I remember Tyndale's translation, which is common to many, many people, the fruit of righteousness is a tree of life, and the one who saves souls is wise.

Now, a Hebrew reader could not have had the connotations that we have with the one who saves souls is wise. On the other hand, that isn't entirely off the mark. It's just the proverb put into a very Christian context.

So, we may deal with the first half of the proverb, which says, the fruit of righteousness is a tree of life. It just means that, like a tree bears fruit, and the fruit is the sustenance of life. So, if you are the kind of character, the blessed character of Proverbs chapter 3, the one who shares these characteristics and these values and lives in this way, then the result is a benefit to all of those people who are around you.

So, in that sense, a person who is wise, and that's what righteousness is about here, we're describing a person who is wise. Wise people are a benefit to all those around him. Now, what about the one who saves souls is wise? Well, here's where we get into a little bit of language difficulty because a word like soul has numerous different senses.

And that is true also in the English language. Now, in the English language, our sense of the word soul always begins with a Greek word, psuke. And in the Greek language, the soul is something that's non-material.

The Greeks regarded the body as not being the real person. The real person is something that is simply, in some cases, kind of shackled by the body, and limited by the body. And what the person has to do is free themselves from this body so that they can be who they really are.

And psuke describes the person in the sense of not being handicapped and shackled by the body. But in the Hebrew language, the word translated by soul is nephesh. And that is the word that we have here, the Hebrew word nephesh.

The Hebrew word *nephesh* really means breath. And from the idea of breath comes ideas like desire or appetite, and various other sorts of things because our desires and appetites sometimes are reflected in our breathing. But essentially it means throat or breath or something like that.

And animals have *nephesh*. So, when this proverb uses the word *nephesh*, the one who takes lives is wise. It is using it in this sense of the breath of a person.

So, the essential common denominator here for soul is it simply represents a person. And all of our languages use it that way. Hebrew and Greek and English can use the word soul simply to mean a person.

So, I can say 30 souls were lost in the sinking of the ship at sea. And all I mean is 30 people died. But we say 30 souls.

Well, that's the exact sense that is meant here. It's a person. Now, how does a wise person take people? Well, an analogy here might come from the adulteress in chapter 6, 25, and 26.

Remember that she was being described as alluring the young man and taking him. She captures him with her flattery and with her wiles. And so, in the same sense, this verse is saying that a wise person knows how to influence other people, knows how to capture them.

Now, you can capture them in two senses, I would say. You can capture them in the sense that you win their mind. You get them to see what wisdom is.

You get them to see what righteousness is. So, if the first part of the verse says the fruit of righteousness is a tree of life, the second part of the verse says, that the wise person captures people so they become righteous. He wins over their way of thinking.

But you could take it also the way Tyndale did. Because, you see, if they aren't wise, if they aren't righteous, they're destined for death. Fools all end up in death.

And so, if the wise person captures people to bring them over into righteousness, captures individuals, he rescues them. He saves them. And if you put that into a Christian context, what we do is save souls because we bring them to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, there's a kind of a really good example of the flexibility of Proverbs in their application. It's not wrong. And I've heard long sermons preached on this verse.

He who saves souls is wise. And I sometimes have had to smile a little bit because the speaker has simply taken this proverb from the Tyndale translation and is completely oblivious to the way in which a Hebrew would have understood it. And yet, at the same time, I'm kind of happy because I say, well, you know, in terms of our context and what we're doing, he's saying exactly what the proverb was meant to say.

And it may be that Tyndale himself understood all of that perfectly well. In fact, I'm suspicious that he did because Tyndale, William Tyndale, was burned at the stake because he translated the Bible, and was a brilliant linguist. And he really knew the essence of the original language but had a genius for replicating it into the language of English, which was the language to which he was bringing Hebrew.

So, I have even more respect when I come across some of William Tyndale's translations, which is why I always have a little bit of sympathy for the King James only version notion, because it retains the genius of William Tyndale. And frankly, that can't be a bad thing. There's something good to be said about that.

My regret is that most of us don't understand the English of William Tyndale. And that's where I have some differences with King James version only, because it's not our English, it was William Tyndale's English. Now, the tree of life is hope, this comes in chapter 13, verse 12.

And it says hope delayed disappoints the mind. It disillusiones the mind; it weakens the mind. But a desire that happens is a tree of life.

Now, there's a proverb that is just so self-evidently true. I hope. Well, here's a good example.

I just fell hopelessly for this young girl called Esther. I mean, I was driving the tractor on the field, and all I could see were images of her, and she just occupied my mind the whole time. And what do I hope? Well, I'm hoping that if I can cultivate this relationship, she's going to agree to live with me.

And let me tell you, in fact, we were looking at old pictures just the other day, and my sister Verna commented, she says, all I can remember from your wedding day is that you were really happy. Well, that's this proverb. A desire fulfilled is a tree of life.

It just fills you with all encouragement and makes you say that you want to go forward. But a hope delayed, deferred, is a disappointment of mind. And that's happened to some that I know as well.

She didn't say yes. And believe me, that hurts. However, worst of all is when we lose all hope.

It is said that if you lose your money, you lose a lot. But if you lose your friends, you lose a lot more. But when you've lost hope, you've lost everything.

And I often think of that in relation to the situations and people that I see. When I see someone who has nothing to lose, and they have no hope, I say, that's a very dangerous person. They have nothing to lose.

They can do anything. So, giving hope is very, very important. And it's often in our power.

We head back to chapter 3, verse 28, Pay your debt when you can. Everybody always likes to get money that they weren't expecting. And it can happen through words.

We'll come back to this proverb. Apples of gold and engravings of silver are like a word that's spoken at the right time. And you know, that has happened to me.

Someone has said something, and they weren't even trying to encourage me. But it was the right word at the right time. And wow, that was just like a tree of life.

Now, on the topic of the power of words for life, I do want to spend a little bit of time on the first verses of chapter 15. Because the first four verses really have quite a lot to say about words. How do you respond to an angry person? Well, a soft answer dissipates anger.

Takes it away. But a painful answer, here's our word about pain again. Words can be really painful.

A kind of pain that Eve had in the garden. It stirs up anger. How does anger stir it up? Well, you see it all the time.

Somebody makes an angry retort, and what do you get? Angry retort in return. And pretty soon things continue to escalate and heat up. Now, I had an incident the other day.

I'm the first to confess that I'm not a very good driver. There's always something I didn't see that I should have seen.

And this happened in a parking lot. There was construction going on in the parking lot. And so, they had a barricade all setup.

And then a big plow pulled in beside on the other side. And so, there was really no room to move. And when I pulled in there, I just assumed I would back out.

And it never crossed my mind that somebody would come and park right behind me. Because it was evident that that was double parking. But of course, you should look.

Now, I was in my, well, they call it a RV. Recreational vehicle? Is that the right term? Anyway, it's a Toyota. It says truck on my license.

And it's higher up, and the back window is high. And this was a tiny little car down below. And so, I jumped in.

I had just put it in reverse, and inched back. And I hear this bump. And I thought, whoa, what is that? And of course, I get out.

And there's the car right behind. And the woman who was the driver of the car was just coming out of Tim Hortons with her coffee. And she blew up.

Oh, I was the most evil person in the whole world. And how on earth could I be so blind as to not see her car? And I looked at it, and there wasn't a stitch of damage. You couldn't see a mark.

There was nothing. And I said, well, oh, my goodness, we had to go through the hole. But the longer I talked to her and said, look, you know, the sky hasn't fallen in.

It's actually all going to be OK. After a while, she kind of calmed down. And she drove off, and nothing more was ever heard.

A soft answer. I don't use soft answers nearly often enough, let me tell you that. In verse 2, what we have is that a wise tongue brings about useful knowledge.

But the mouth of fools simply babbles foolishness. You know, fools aren't stupid. They're just wrong.

And there's a big difference between the two. Intelligent people can be very, very wrong. And the saddest thing of all is that they just don't realize that they're wrong.

And because they're intelligent, they just assume that even if they are wrong, they're smarter than everybody else in the room. And so, therefore, they're going to be right. And I've seen that over and over again.

And I don't doubt I've been guilty of that over and over again. But I do try to be a wise person. And I do try to be righteous.

And I do try to be the one who has the wise tongue that brings about understanding. That makes it more clear. And we need to be careful that we aren't the ones who may be very smart.

But it's just foolishness. There are just too many examples of that in academia. I just didn't get on that.

This is another subject. But this whole thing about race theory that I'm hearing a lot about these days, in my mind, has been proven over and over again by sensible common people that the intellectuals at Harvard who generated this stuff were just wrong. They're babbling foolishness.

And I don't mind if someone of them hears this video and hears me call them that. So, the eyes of the Lord are in every place, and they're observing the good and the bad. You know, sometimes we just think things.

We don't say them. And this proverb is saying, you know, even when you're thinking bad things and wrong things, you're in a pretty separate place. Because the step between thinking it and saying it is very, very short.

And even if you manage not to take that step, there's someone who knows. And if you fear that person, you should be fearing right now. Because this isn't doing you any good.

And then finally, a healing tongue, very literally, a healing tongue is a tree of life. But where there is waywardness, slipperiness, where you're going off of the right road, then there is a broken spirit. Yes, any kind of deceit betrays, and it's very hurtful.

But on the other hand, if you can say the right word, it's just a tree of life. James has it right. The tongue is really powerful.

It's like the rudder on a ship. Small thing, but steers the whole direction of a monster artifact, a ship. And the tongue really does control the whole body.

The tongue really does control much more than the body. It can start a war. And as we know these days, as I speak, Ukraine is being invaded by the Russian powers, and that all starts with words.

I just want to conclude this little talk about a tree of life with how Proverbs motivate. Now, you can say, that if you do the right thing, then the right thing is going to happen. That isn't always true.

Now, Proverbs recognizes that it is a rule that should be followed, because if you do the right thing, then there is always hope that the right consequence is going to happen. But sometimes the Proverbs acknowledge that you may do all the right things and be the poor person. You may do all the right things and suffer injustice.

There is no assurance that because you did all the right things, good consequences are going to come. So, the theory, purported in scholarly circles, especially by a scholar named Koch, is not really what Proverbs are about. He's observing something about some Proverbs.

Do the right thing and the right thing will happen. But that's not what it's about. Rather, Proverbs was saying, be the right person.

Be the right person. And in the end, that's going to be the right thing. Now, it doesn't mean your life will be easy or that your life will be good.

But what it does mean is that you'll leave a good reputation, that you will leave a good influence on others, that you're going to have a legacy that is going to be valued. And that's what you want to have. That's the whole point.

Proverbs develops values. So, as the student, as the adolescent, as the naive person, learns wisdom, they internalize values. And these values lead you to ways that are life, or these values lead to ways of death.

And numerous Proverbs say that. Words of righteousness guide, they shepherd, but fools die from lack of sense. The fear of the Lord, alas, days of life, the years of the wicked are cut short.

Other verses in this very same chapter. But it's just saying that wisdom is about being the right person. And there are personal benefits.

Honor. The reputation of the righteous is a blessing. That's the thing that you have to value, your reputation.

There is shame for those who dismiss discipline, but one who observes correction is honored. These are all Proverbs that come from this collection of 375. You can have security.

And this is the security that you know that your reputation with others is going to be known and that you are safe with God. So, the dread of the wicked will come, but God will grant the desires of the righteous. And in what way that may happen isn't always in terms of circumstance.

I read Open Doors all the time. That's an organization of Brother Andrew. And I get very humbled by these testimonies of Christians who suffer the worst, the burning down of their homes, the being driven away from their families, being driven out of their villages.

I hear these stories from just numerous parts of the world. And I wonder about these people, and yet, I realize that these people don't want you to feel sorry for them. They have a joy.

A joy that comes from knowing Jesus. And that's why they can't give up their faith, because they've got something that is just much more valuable than anything else. It is a little like Paul said, For me to live is Christ.

And if Christ calls me and I die, well, that only means I live behind some of the pain, and I have even more of the thing that gives me joy. And I think these proverbs are saying something along that line. A good person will attain the favor of the Lord, but the schemer will be condemned.

No one will stand secure and witness. The root of the righteous will not move. These are all the kinds of proverbs that affirm these sorts of things.

But it's not just the individual, it is the community as well. And so it may be individual. The talk of the ungodly destroys the neighbor, but the righteous are rescued in knowledge.

From chapter 11. One who shames his neighbor lacks sense. An understanding person is silent.

You know, sometimes people do things that are wrong. And when you're the one who knows it, you realize that you aren't that different, and you also do things that are wrong. And it doesn't have to be told.

The wise person just leaves it alone. There are community benefits to prosperity if the righteous city exalts. When the wicked perish, there is jubilation.

In the blessing of the righteous, the city is exalted. The speech of the wicked overthrows the city. We sometimes say you get the kind of leadership that you deserve.

That certainly isn't always true. But what is true is that when there is the influence of righteousness among a group of people, there is a blessing that ensues. A slanderer exposes confidentiality, but a trustworthy person covers the matter.

This proverb says much the same thing as the one that we had talked about earlier. So that's the kind of pattern that one can look for as you are reading Proverbs. As you're reading Proverbs, think not just about specifics, but think a little more largely in terms of what kind of virtue, what kind of value, what kind of character is blessed, and how is this proverb informing that.

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