



Tomorrow is the gift of the Lord

by Calvin G. Seerveld

If you are willing to turn this TAKE HOLD column into a study exercise, before you continue, first read through Proverbs 27: 1-11 in your favorite translation and write down in your own words what you think the verses mean. Then compare your own digest to what is presented here, and maybe write me what you think.

Please read the following passage out loud, very slowly, listening to its intonation. As Buber said, the Scriptures are meant to be heard.

Don't start congratulating yourself on the fact that tomorrow is coming up, because you don't really know, do you? what your tomorrow will bring. [Better] let somebody who doesn't belong to your kind say how good you are, not your own mouth - yes, let "the strange fellow" glory in your accomplishments, not your own lips!

Stones don't give and wet sand hangs heavy [on your feet] , but the unresponsive obstinacy of a godless fellow is more burdensome than both. [Never forget:] the cruelty of raging anger and the rush of overflowing scorn [gradually subside] ; but who could ever stand up to the jealousy [of God] !

A love which can openheartedly set things straight is much better than one which stays all choked up.
You can trust the bruising caused by someone who really loves you, but all the kisses of one who hates you are superfluous.
A person who is completely filled will turn up his nose at the sweetest honey, but to a man who is hungry, even what is bitter tastes sweet.
Like a stray bird fluttering distractedly far away from its nest, so bewildered is the man who wandering around has lost his place.

Sweet-smelling oils and lighted incense make you merry deep down; so does the sweetness of a man's close friend, because of his heart-to-heart talk and counsel. [So] don't let your fellow friend down, don't leave your friend of the family in the lurch, and then run over to your brother's house when your own day of trouble comes: a neighbour who is close to you is better than a brother hard to reach.

Do become wise, my child, and make my heart joyful!
so that I may have the word to counter the one who taunts me

(Proverbs 27: 1-11)

Too many of us, I am afraid, have been brainwashed into reading Scriptural Proverbs like a commonplace book of pithy observations that ring true to life once you stop and think about them. And often, if we happen to be orthodox believers, we are very happy to have these insights in the Bible because they are so handy to quote for proving a point you want to make; after all, who can argue with a proverb backed up by the Holy Spirit's infallibility?

But to use Scripture unwittingly this way, I believe, has lost us its special revelation and deeply reforming dimension. Even if you show how a given text here and there ties in directly with Jesus Christ's gift of salvation, such a method of reading Proverbs has ripped to pieces the imperative seam of Scripture and made its rich directive and healing comfort powerless ("of none effect" says the King James translation). Like a hypocrite then, one is apt to teach earnestly the "traditions of men" as the commandments of God (read carefully Matthew 15:1-9)!

The Old Testament Proverbs are *not* a collection of atomic protocol sentences which formulate the folk wisdom of Israel about ordinary life and punctuate, for our edification, its common sense realism with pious pledges of allegiance to Jehovah. No. Instead, as Scripture itself says, these clusters of "artful comparisons" (*meshalim*) composed by the Lord's servant Solomon (Proverbs 1:1, 10: 1, 25: 1) and other learned wise men (22: 17, 30: 1, 31 : 1) is of a piece with the rest of Scripture which is a true account of *magnalia Dei*, the Great Deeds of the Lord! and is a way the very begotten Wisdom of Almighty Yahweh calls to Life whoever has ears to hear (8:22-36,1-21; 1 :20-33). That is, the fear of the Lord and the understanding of His workings, which Proverbs itself says is its point (1: 2-6,7; 22:17-19) must be the key to our actual listening attention. Otherwise the compelling (kerygmatic) texture and claim of its storied narrative unravels into propositional fact and advice.

For example, one could hear the verses of Proverbs 27 something like this: Do not count your chickens before they hatch, since a man's hybris is dealt with severely (27:1). Modesty becomes a man and humility is a virtue (27:2). The pigheadedness of a fool is worse than obdurate sand and stone (27:3). Jealousy is even more difficult than anger to cope with; so stay out of any triangular love 'fairs (27:4) etc.

To read Scripture this way seems to me to be the most pitiable of all undertakings. Where is the hope and the joy and the judgment of hearing one's Creator or heavenly Father talk to him?

Rather, one should read the four-verse paragraph beginning chapter 27 while hearing Proverbs 25:21-22 ring in the back of his mind, which sounds the dominant note for the whole large section of chapters 25-27: the Lord God will finish things off! Yahweh shall shalom your broken deeds! The Covenanting God will make complete and whole the witness, work and speech of His people!

And this glorious promise of 25: 22 (cf. *Vanguard*, May-June 1972 & January-February 1973) gets its vibrant pulse from 1:7, which sets the tone of the whole book: unconditional recognition of God Almighty's faithful Rule (= fear of the Lord) is the starting point of wisdom; and to scorn such disciplining is the mark of a fool (= godless man or woman).

So when you pick up chapter 27 and start reading, you hear the Good News: I, the Lord God Yahweh, attend you with daily bread and establish the work of your faithful hands or, with a sorrowful anger, pick up the pieces of your wasted life. Don't take your cue from those who are strangers to my jealous love which hovers over you, Israel, day by day! Don't think you can go it alone if you calculate carefully, make conservative estimates, and plan for tomorrow's success. Those who go it alone perish alone, as fools. You need not worry about tomorrow's evil, my people, and cut out that self-reliance which creeps every day into your business! I am the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, and hold you tightly by the hand so that the good works I set for you to walk in shall indeed take place ...

And then our passage continues with Solomon's literary artistry as mouthpiece for the Lord: your setbacks, my children, are not accidents - pour out your heart to me! - but the cords of my love believe me! (27:5-6) You will not be able to hear my voice if you ate trying so hard to take care of yourself, but stop it! find out what your appointed service as my adopted son or daughter is so that you will be at home in my world. (27:7-8)

Get past treating friendship like a hedonist frill and build up your communion of fall-back trust beyond your blood relatives: a neighbour of kindred spirit and a friend who sticks closer than a brother is the beginning of a peoplehood of Wisdom - and I want you children of believing Abraham to be children of Wisdom! so I may *show* the . Accuser of my Rule straightened-out life (= righteousness) at work. (27:9-11)

Nothing less than God's impassioned speech comes at us in Proverbs 27: His Name is at stake in how we live! Every phrase is freighted with the cosmic-historical, critically-redemptive faithfulness of His love command to obedience.

Tomorrow in Scripture (27: 1) is "the day that the Lord has made" (Genesis 1: 1-2:3, Matthew 6:24-34), not just another neutral twenty-four hours. *Stranger* in Scripture (27:2) is somebody strange-**to-God**, ignorant of His creational-covenantal love bonds, prone to perversity (e.g. Proverbs 5:15-23 & cf. Galatians 4: 1-7), not just somebody you are unacquainted with. *Fool* in Scripture (27:3) is not just some jester or coxcomb able to make you laugh, but is a dreadfully serious offence - anyone who pretends God is not there (for example, compare Romans 1: 18-25 & Psalm 14). *Jealousy* in Scripture (27:4) is not just some petty, bitchy fickleness, but reveals the terrible, almighty, constant, selective edge to Yahweh's love for His people (Exodus 20: 1-7, Song of Songs 8:6-7, Hebrews 12:18-29). And so on.

You have debased the Bible if you think it spends time piously informing us that quarreling lovers should get things out into the open (27:5) and parental use of the rod is good for us (27:6), that hunger is the best cook (27:7) and displaced persons or homesick people are like lost birds (27:8). That makes a farce of the Bible God has put into our hands.

27:5-8 is God-breathed commentary on 27:1-4 and tells us to be responsive to His leading, not foolishly unresponsive like stones and dirt, but to go ahead and plead with Him familiarly, to take hold of God and literally pull Him around to face your needs (cf. Luke 18: 1-8) because truly, whom He sometimes touches with hardship He loves with an everlasting love (Proverbs 3:11-12, Hebrews 12:4-11). If you are

satisfied with yourself, closed and hardened to the fact that your food is manna from heaven and your work is meant to be a calling in the King's royal service (I Peter 2: 1-10), then "tomorrow" and even any success will be an everlasting distraction, ruining you, turning you into a creaturely fugitive.

That is, the focus of Proverbs 27: 1-4 and 5-8 is the wonderful doings of the Lord! a revelation of the presence of His Kingdom Rule right among us, if we only get the eye and ear of faith to receive it (cf. Luke 17:20-21).

Likewise 27:9-10 is not a brief disquisition on "friendship-in-general" like Aristotle, Cicero or Francis Bacon might attempt, a "moral discourse" on how leisurely, confidential talk between staunch friends, with wine and candlelight, ennoble your quality of life. Again, No! Already in Proverbs 27:9-10, at the time of Solomon's expansive business deals with Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 5) and his luxury trade with Egypt (1 Kings 10: 14-29, cf. forbidden, in Deuteronomy 17: 14-17), the Lord was sounding a little note against the Jewish racist pride of Abrahamic blood that later grew into such a stumbling block to Christ's ministry and growth of the early Apostolic church (Matthew 3:7-12, John 8:30-47, Acts 6: 1, Galatians 2: 11-21): truth cemented in Wisdom is thicker than blood - I want you to become *wise!* (27: 11) - and is a model for the responsible brotherhood and neighbour-love that shall flow freely from those who know that Yahweh is absolute Lord of the morrow (John 2:9-11, Mark 12:29-31).

Now it is this "Wisdom-focus" of Proverbs 27: 1-11 and the intrinsically *coram Deo*, proclamatory grabbing of the reader to face its special, direct-from-God (*theopneustos*) bite which the biblical writings have as a whole that my Toronto colleague, James Olthuis at the Institute for Christian Studies, calls "the confessional focus" of Holy Scripture. He is not saying the Bible is simply a human confession about God's dealings with mankind in history (as Neo-orthodox Christians have held); Olthuis means that the biblical Word has as its defining character the power to redirect and inform our sinful lives not by giving us bits of information but by *republicanizing, with full and total authority, primed for confessional response, the Certain Way of Life*. God's biblical Word tells us again how the Almighty God of heaven and earth wants us to walk as His creatures with Him, and Scripture does that by opening our human eyes, made new in accepting Jesus Christ as Lord, to the confessible reality of the Lord God's reconciling Rule of historical creation (cf. II Corinthians 5: 17-19).

For example, in plain language: the Old Testament *Song of Songs* reveals the meaning of man-and-woman love as God creationally ordered it to be. God spoke that book for us in a setting critical of Solomon's faithless debauchery (cf. I Kings 11: 1-13) and had the book artistically composed, almost like an oratorio, to do justice to the nuances of a sexually matured woman -and man's betrothed attachment on earth (cf. my *The Greatest Song* [Wedge, 1967]). The *Song of Songs* is not a typological tract about Jesus Christ any more than it is a manual of sex education for engaged couples. The biblical *Song of Songs* proclaims that the to-be-married love bond is God's doing! His ordinance of bodied truth (among those eulogized by Psalm 119) is what we are called to gratefully live within, exploring the delight of our sexual creatureliness (or disintegratedly die within). And there should be no doubt in anybody's mind, especially in our day of perverse eroticism, that to have the rich normality of a

concrete marriage is a Great Deed of the Lord! as big as getting the Israelites through the Red Sea on dry ground, centuries ago. The biblical Song of Songs gives us such specific life-direction.

And Proverbs too is pregnant with such comforting, challenging Wisdom (remember chapter 8 !). Chapter 27 says: **Tomorrow is a gift of the Lord!**

Let no one say that such a reformationally Christian reading of Proverbs 27:1-11 empties the words of confessible! factual meaning and leaves one with formulae or generalities. *Tomorrow* is as specific and real as the weather when you wake up, and *strangers* are as concrete as your gimmick salesmen on TV, *fool* is as relevant as the man who believes his daily paper gives him news! and *jealousy* is as factual as the twilight of western civilization - if you have biblically tuned ears. That tomorrow is literally a gift of the jealous Lord is simply astounding good news for those who take Him at His Word in the presence of the millions of strangers and fools in North America!

It is the stilted poverty of our devotions (can you read God talking in Proverbs 27:5 above without crying!?), the self-pitying lament at our difficulties, the terrible pseudo-assurances we take from purposeless routine, and the deep bewilderment we often have at what's happening to the dollar, old-fashioned decorum and the world situation that stops us from being re-formed to hear and believe this Good News of Proverb 27: **tomorrow is a gift of the Lord!** Tomorrow is not a matter of positivist fact. To have a tomorrow is a Christian faith-reality (cf. refrain in Proverbs 23: 17-18, 24:14,20), and to pick up tomorrow with a confession of genuine thanksgiving is our happy task.

You people who keep on saying, "Today or tomorrow we're taking off for this or that city and we're going to stay there for a year, do some business and make some money" - don't kid yourself! What do people like you know about tomorrow! and what sort of life will be yours? Actually you are just a breath of hot air that shows up briefly and disappears. Instead, come to say, "If it please the Lord and we are alive, we shall be doing this or that - But now, you are showing off self-certainty in your thoughtless claptrap! And all such self-certainty [about tomorrow] is living in sin ... " (James 4:13-16)

Tomorrow is not something you must have mastered, says the Word of God, and is not something you can presume to case. Tomorrow is a gift of the Lord! for you, discouraged on your sick bed, or business man with your airplane ticket, student hesitant about a new year of study, craftsman labourer with too many bills to pay, woman uncomfortably filled with child, young person in the bloom of health - Proverbs 27 declares that tomorrow is a gift of the Lord! and that Good News is utterly certain. All we need do is hear it confessingly and pick it up trustfully, with obedient fear and trembling joy. *

*Maybe some of you think I'm making it difficult to read the Bible. You mean I can't just pick up Proverbs 27 and start reading it! Do I have to read Proverbs 25-27 first, learn about the centrality of 1: 7, the subordinate focusing character of 25: 21-22, think about James 4 etcetera before I'm done? Good night, I'll need a specialist . like a theologian, at least a priest or a preacher, to do all that. Where

would I get the time? - I have to earn a living! Are you saying I have to *search* the Scriptures in this reformational Christian way before I know what they are saying?

(1) Now please reread the translation of Proverbs 27 above. This passage has grown on me as I struggled to hear its message in the chorus of the entire book, the Old Testament, and the whole Bible. That takes time. (2) The leaders of God's people, whose professional task it is to *open up the Scriptures* rather than close them with an uncritically inherited, positivistic theory of knowledge hidden behind the club of a Victorian ethic, will have to make their own account with the Lord. (3) You who have taken the time to follow me this far should realize the seriousness of what we are doing and take heart, for it is true, also in reading the Bible: "Whoever knows what the good is and doesn't do it that business has become sin for him!" (James 4: 17) •