

# take hold of God and pull

by Calvin Seerveld

## How God's Word of Proverbs Communicates

A godless ruler stands over his folk  
like a lion growling or a bear lunging at prey - poor folk -  
and the more meagre a leader's Understanding, the more violently is one  
oppressed.  
Only if you thoroughly hate cutthroat success will your days prove to be good  
ones.

Don't try to hold back the man who is running scared straight into a dead end,  
driven on roughshod by the blood on his hands:  
he who walks around without guile shall experience true freedom,  
but those busy finagling crooked ways shall all of a sudden ... collapse!

Whoever works at his little plot of ground will have more than enough daily  
bread;

but whoever chases what's hot air shall get filled up with emptiness!

A man who is truly faithful seems to teem with blessings:

but a man in a hurry to get rich never remains ... unpunished --

(It's simply not good to play favourites among people;

that way even a strong man can get tripped up over a mouthful of bread.)

Anybody who is intently out to get possessions has an evil eye,  
and it never occurs to him in his guts that total emptiness is what shall overtake  
him!

(If you reprove a man fairly, you'll find he respects you late on much more  
than if you had lathered him with a swiveling tongue.) Anyone who withholds  
from his father and his mother their due and says, "It's not really a crime" -  
that fellow is a co-worker with the Man of Destruction!

The person who always wants more, constantly stirs up only contention:  
the one who rests trustingly on Yahweh, however, shall wax quietly refreshed.  
Whoever rests easy in his own heart, of course, is a downright fool!  
You have to walk in Wisdom if you would be saved:  
whoever gives to the destitute shall never, never suffer lack;  
whoever closes his eyes to such need will be richly ... cursed!

Remember:

when the godless wrongdoers win success, a man does well to get out of sight;  
but when such VIP's go to pieces, then shall those who live justly grow  
strong!

(Proverbs 28: 15-28)

The catch to reading Proverbs, as a  
believer, is to realize it is not a book of  
atomic aphorisms. Proverbs is much  
more like Christ's parables, where it  
takes four or five verses to cumulate to a  
single point. And frequently one

multiple-verse point is set next to  
another multiple-verse point as  
variation on a theme or by contrast  
leading on to a still more central,  
unifying point that hits the target  
bullseye: our listening hearts.

We have been trained by so many  
translations to chew the Bible into odds  
and ends of verses (the Bible has been  
broken up into verses for only the past few  
hundred years) that it's hard for us to  
realize how connectedly it should be read.  
The mass media today also hinder Bible  
reading, because they gear us for instant  
communication ..

It's the headlines you want, man!  
the TV newsclip of a dramatic  
incident - one picture is worth a  
thousand words - why wait ten  
sentences for the enriched point if you  
can get it out in ten words or less?-  
telegraphic prose - speed! - instant  
communication - get it while it's hot! -  
besides, people are busy, so make it  
snappy.

Most of us are suckers for the razzle-  
dazzle, and do not notice how it cheapens  
meaning. So "Jesus Saves" becomes a  
bumper sticker slogan like "Things Go  
Better With Coke," and we think that's  
Gospel. Meanwhile, the Bible, especially  
the Old Testament, becomes a closed  
book. Or a paraphrase.

You will never understand the Bible if  
you read it fast. And You will certainly  
never understand Proverbs if you take it as  
a collection of discrete propositions,  
which allows you the liberty to pick here  
and there for what strikes your fancy, fits  
your personality, or serves as infallible  
backup for this or that argument you want  
to make. Proverbs 28 is simply not written  
that way and should not be read as an  
almanac on "Successful Christian Living."

A man who has power and is not  
constrained by the love of Christ to seek  
the common weal of those whom he is to  
serve is a predator. And every victim of  
such a godless leader's rape only feeds the  
blindness for more extortion, more blood,  
more unjust gain at the expense of his  
defenceless subjects. Don't get caught in  
that web of backroom deals, compromised  
success, and everlasting conniving. It is a  
hell-bent, brutalizing stupidity! (28:15-18)

If you want to amass wealth, if you  
are obsessed by the idea to enlarge your  
little nest egg to outlast inflation, it will  
warp your life. If you speculate how to  
get ahead, scramble to know the right  
people, smooth talk your way into  
positions of power, poor you! sold  
yourself to the devil! For example,

you will live as if money is thicker than blood, the blood in your veins from your parents; and you will live in constant poverty - always needing more than you have! Ironic. It is those you can count on to be faithful in doing little tasks, who are content with less, that have an aura of having more than enough, as if they are .. rich! (28: 19-24)

Those who struggle to get ahead are anti-christs, and ferment everlasting trouble. Those who drop out and suck a pacifier are simply fools! You have to walk in Wisdom if you would be saved: holding on close to only the Lord for security, quietly refreshed by His living Holy Spirit, you give away all that you have to the misled, waylaid poor of the world who have been abandoned by the godless who ruled them to ruin (28:25-27).

Remember: bide your time and truly wait upon the Lord as you build your shadow culture. God has never wanted headlines. In his time Christ will return to extirpate godless rule and culminate the talents his people, his poor people, have traded in the marketplace (28 :28).

You see what a tightly meshed, unit structure Proverbs 28: 15-28 shows. The section begins with a graphic image of wicked leaders, who in their betrayal of office are like beasts, like swine before whom you should not cast pearls (:15-18). Then the same theme of godless men who, because they are godless, necessarily play God and botch it, rampant with destructive power: that theme is developed in loco greed, in contrast to the man who is like a tree planted by running waters, which bears its fruit on time and whose leaves do not fade (: 19-24). Sotto voce, as it were, the inspired writer comments very experientially on the seduction of just a little duplicity (:21,23). And finally comes the formulated nub of the whole passage toward which :15-18 and :19-24 were aimed: those who scabble for more, who are religiously self-reliant and selfishly closed in their covetousness are damned! and a blight upon their neighbours: those who rely on the Lord and walk in His ordinances *are* blessed, and shall inherit the earth (:25-27). After that epitome, 28:28 echoes 28: 12 and anticipates 29:2 and 29: 16, tying this section in with other sections, reinforcing the crucial thrust of 25:21-22 and 29:25-27 which govern

this whole corpus of five chapters copied over by Hezekiah's wisemen (25: 1), and articulates the apocalyptic dimension with which Scripture is always pregnant.

This means that the old standard International Critical Commentary on *Proverbs* is false when it says again and again, "The words yield no sense. The sentence ... was inserted here by mistake" (Toy on 28:17, p. 502), etc. And *The Living Bible*, which treats Proverbs atomistically, begs to be misunderstood when it says "Hard work brings prosperity; playing around brings poverty" for 28: 19 - nothing could be more superficial and further from the truth if in its splendid verse-isolation it is read to mean, "God helps those who help themselves." No! That Protestant work ethic which absorbs God's blessing into man's effort and promotes partnerships like Seerveld God, Inc. (rather than Seerveld, a field for the Lord to work in), encourages, I am afraid, the hyperactive oppression that Proverbs, rightly read, denounces. Faithful work is an unselfish response to the Lord's calling, and is not pulling yourself up by some sanctified bootstraps ....

By my thesis and argument - what I am *demonstrating* - is that Proverbs 28: 15-28 is of a piece. And you violate God's Word, manipulate it! if you read it like an anthology of atomistic propositions. That's the way the sects always mutilate Scripture (and the way clerics, in a pinch, use the Bible as a grab bag of verses to bolster a hurried, pastoral homily). What God says in Proverbs will be missed if the book is construed as bits and pieces. Such an atomistic prejudgement conceives the Proverbs text to be structurally context-less, like a string of Delphic oracles, which you interpret to suit the occasion. What makes things so confusing is that the hermeneutic of atomic verse units commits one compositionally to an essentially arbitrary reading. While a given exegete or wise father working with Proverbs atomistically will often import a cohering biblical context by virtue of having a living christian faith, the hermeneutic method they assume nevertheless promotes a whimsical exegesis. What's to stop you from letting your sanctified imagination roam if you are dealing with oracles dropped out of the blue?

But the fact is that Proverbs 28: 1528 is *not* a collection of Delphic oracles. It is an artistically edited whole of an interlocking structure which weaves together richly a single, powerful message that is unambiguous. And Proverbs 28: 15-28 fits snug into chapter 28 and in the unit of Proverbs 28-29, which connects closely with chapters 25-27, all of which hark back to the tremendous climax of Proverbs 8: 2236, book-ended by Proverbs 1 :20-33 and chapter 9, cued by the book's prologue, 1 :2-7 ... and Proverbs 28: 1528 calls to mind *literally too* the context of Psalms 1 and 2, portions of Amos and Micah, Matthew 5-7, James 4: 1-5: 11, I John 3: 11-18 (and so one could go on). God's Proverb Word communicates not aphoristic-atomistically, but connectedly, in a highly artistically fashioned, Wisdom-literary way. Once one understands that about God's Word of Proverbs, there is much less room to read it arbitrarily. On the other hand, so long as you pick up and use Proverbs like a telephone book, you are most likely to get a wrong number.

I know, one can read Proverbs 28: 1528 in its integral wholeness and still not hear it. We are so hard of hearing because if we heard and obeyed the truth of Proverbs 28: 15-28 - YOU HAVE TO WALK IN WISDOM TO BE SAVED - why it would mean we'd have to change, quite concretely and radically, our habit of life as citizens, customers, salesmen, administrators, teachers, parents, you name it, and that's almost like Jesus asking that fellow to give up all his goods to the poor and follow him. You don't really mean that, do you, God?

God does. - Have mercy on us, Lord! But my point this time is that we should learn to read Proverbs as it is written. Maybe then it will be harder for us to wiggle out of responding with our life to the total impact of God's living Proverb book, which should be cutting us to the quick to repent, reform, and to hope.

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