

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of PROVERBS

The Book of Proverbs belongs to the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, along with Job and Ecclesiastes, Derek Kidner, in his excellent Tyndale Commentary on the book (an indispensable companion to study) quotes Jeremiah 18:18, "The law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet", and points out that wisdom is here recognised as one main channel of divine revelation, along with the law and the prophets. The key-note is found in the opening words of the book - "to know wisdom and instruction". It offers, as Kidner says, "a key to Life... its function in Scripture is to put godliness into working clothes; to name business and society as spheres in which we are to acquit ourselves with credit to our Lord, and in which we are to look for His training. It deals with the hard facts of life, and reminds us that these are "God's facts, and His appointed school of character; they are not alternatives to His grace, but means of it; for everything is of grace, from the power to know to the power to obey".

1:1

We must consider some introductory points first of all in this study before proceeding to the details of the text. As pointed out in the above introduction, the purpose of the book is stated in its opening verses as being "to know wisdom and instruction. Kidner says, "The samples of behaviour which it holds up to view are all assessed by one criterion, which could be summed up in the question, 'Is this wisdom or folly?'" . In another place he speaks of divine wisdom being applied to the grass roots of life, in a union of piety and practicality. The relevance of this for today is surely clearly to be seen. It is perhaps significant that Proverbs is a book not much read and studied now as it was in earlier ages, and that ours is an age not pre-eminently characterised by wisdom in the common ways of life. Today in Christian life we have substituted for divine wisdom the impulses and leadings of what purports to be the Holy Spirit, forgetting that the Spirit's ideal and mature way of leading is from within, not from without, i.e., wisdom emerging in the heart, not making impact on the mind from without. This is seen in errors, for example, of guidance, when sanctified common sense is despised and consequent lack of judgment prevails, and obedience to impulse becomes the order of the day. If the wisdom distilled in the pages of Proverbs were imbibed and hearts soaked in it, this would produce soundness of judgment and integrity of behaviour, It is here that we see the link with New Testament teaching, for the Spirit of God is the spirit of wisdom, and when He comes to us, He comes to make us wise. Paul underlines this in Ephesians 5:17, "Be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is". The word "unwise" translates the Greek "moron". Do not be mindless, says the Apostle, use your head. This is what Proverbs is about.

2) 1:1

A word about the authorship of the book. The first verse says, "The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David", and traditionally his name has been associated with the proverbs. The book itself however tells us that it is the work of several authors, three of whom are named, Solomon (10:1), Agur (30:1), Lemuel (31:1), In addition, there are "the words of the wise" (22:17, 24:23); Hezekiah's collection of Solomon's words (25:1); and one section anonymous (31:10-31).

As to analysis of the book, the following is given by Kidner, and may be usefully followed:

1. Introduction 1:1-7
2. A Father's Praise of Wisdom 1:8-9 9:18
3. Proverbs of Solomon 10:1-22:16
4. Words of Wise Men 22:17-24:32
5. Further Words of Wise Men 24:23-34
6. Further Proverbs of Solomon 25:1-29:27
7. Words of Agur 30:1-33
8. Words of King Lemuel 31:1-9
9. Alphabet of Wifely Excellence 31:10-31.

The subject-matter is remarkably varied, dealing with the relationship between God and man, with wisdom in its many facets; we read about the fool, the sluggard, the simpleton, the scoffer, we have a good deal about friends and friendship; a great deal about words and the power of words, words at their best and words at their worst; about the family, the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children; about life and death, And throughout, the predominant emphasis is on the "behaving" side of religion over against the "believing" side; but not the one divorced from the other, for faith is everywhere assumed, and what is spoken of is the "works" without which faith is dead. Throughout, the "covenant" idea is everywhere the foundation of the thought, Of the 100 references to God, all but a few use the covenant name, Jehovah, It is no mere moralistic teaching that we have in Proverbs, but ethics based upon and issuing from the idea of the covenant.

3) 1:1-7

It will be seen from the analysis given in yesterday's Note that we do not come to Solomon's proverbs until chapter 10, for the good reason, as Kidner points out, "that the reader needs preparation if he is to use them fruitfully". The introduction (1:2-6) indicates that the book is designed to be "a course of education in the life of wisdom". The well-known words in 7 stand as the "text", so to speak, on which the exposition of the following chapters is based. This exposition (1:8-9:18) takes the form of a series of homilies spoken by a father to his son, in which the choice that must be made between wisdom and folly is underlined. Then, in what follows (10:1 ff) we are able to see in each proverb a miniature and particular outworking of the wisdom and folly that have been unfolded in chapters 1-9. The word "wisdom" is one which has a wide range of meaning, and the other words in 2 and 3 instruction, understanding, justice, judgment and equity - are either synonyms or interpretations of what the writer means. Taken together - and these words recur again and again throughout the book - they convey the general meaning of instruction and training - that is to say, the idea of discipline is prominent. The implication is that wisdom is not something that is easily come by, but hard won, and is a quality of character that is produced through hard and rigorous discipline. It is true, of course that all wisdom comes from God - this is the point of the words "will hear" in 5, it is from God that we hear it. But the way God teaches and imparts wisdom is through discipline. To be taught of God is to be taught in the school of discipline (cf 2:6, where it is stressed that it is the Lord who gives wisdom, but this statement follows the hard and arduous search for it mentioned in 2:1-5).

4) 1:1-7

God gives wisdom (2:6) in the context of our striving, wrestling and crying after it, i.e. through the discipline of honourable discipleship, not otherwise. This echoes Paul's famous words in Phil 2:12,13, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure". This consideration prompts a comment on the disparity between the shrewdness and down-to-earth common-sense of an older piety and the hare-brained notions that evangelical folk sometimes develop and entertain in the name of wisdom and of divine guidance. What has happened is that 'common-sense' has abdicated or been deposed in favour of a supposedly higher form of wisdom. The fallacy is to suppose that common-sense is somehow inferior and, from the spiritual point of view a derogatory word. The doctrine of common grace comes in here if we believe in Divine providence at all, we must recognise that God's providential dealings with us in the way that He takes us in life through all its vicissitudes and all its dark experiences, inform our minds and hearts and impart to them the basic qualities of sound sense, shrewdness and balance. This is what we sometimes call "sanctified common sense", and one of the greatest lessons we need to learn is to recognise that this is the gift of God. Some people seem to think that when they become Christians they no longer use their head but have to look to God for guidance. But to think like this is to put the whole matter falsely and in a distorted way. It is to suggest that seeking divine guidance and using your head are mutually exclusive ideas. But the fact of the matter is that God's ideal way of guiding His children is through their using their heads. This Paul plainly teaches in Eph 5:17. When we become believers, it is no indication that we are to lay aside God's gift of common-sense; rather, it will be sanctified by the grace and Spirit of God and will therefore be a much more reliable guide than before. If this were accepted as a basis of Christian living, it would deliver large numbers of people from making the most stupid and serious kind of mistakes in life.

5) **1:1-7**

"The fear of the Lord", (7) says Bridges, "is that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law". Kidner points out that "beginning" (which the AV margin translates "the principal part") means "the first and controlling principle, rather than a stage which one leaves behind" and that this "is not merely a right method of thought but a right relation: a worshipping submission to the God of the covenant". What this means in practical terms is that the true life consists in a bringing of every consideration to the feet of God for His blessing and guidance, with His will the over-riding consideration in everything. A man who takes this attitude is not likely to remain long in the dark as to what the divine will is, for it stands to reason that he will soon know what to do and when to do it. What is implied in 7b is that fools despise the only means whereby this knowledge is gained, i.e., the wisdom and training of 2-6, and the discipline that brings this about and makes it possible. No one who brushes aside the kind of discipline that these verses speak of is likely to arrive at the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise it because they want an easier way: they are not enamoured with the idea of the hard work that is involved in developing shrewdness and balance in their lives. The whole concept of discipline is alien to their thinking.

6) 1:8-9

These verses begin the first fatherly counsel. The reference to father and mother in 8 is more than a mere Hebrew parallelism, and we miss a very real point if we assume that is but that, Both father and mother are here assumed to share the children's training, and to speak with one voice in it, This is important. Not only is it unwise and dangerous for the children's wellbeing for one or other parent to contract out of this responsibility for training (e.g. "I leave that to my wife"), but also, unless they speak with one voice, children will be apt to become bewildered, at best, and at worst, will speedily learn to play off one parent against the other. Parents must present a united front to (but not against:) their children: they must both be heard and understood to say the same thing, The "instruction" of the father and the "law" of the mother have been summed up in 7: it is this that they are to train their children in, and this that leads to true wisdom. The rewards of such a pattern are seen in 9. They are not material rewards, but moral, "the hard-won beauty and authority of goodness", as Kidner puts it, One thinks in this connection of the wonderful passage in praise of wisdom in 3:13 ff. The great question that arises here is how to convince the young of the sheer worth of such rewards, in a society in which very different standards obtain. Well, there is one very real and decisive consideration that must be given all due weight here: if the happiness of the man that finds wisdom (3:13) is incarnated before the eyes of the young in the lives of their parents and spiritual mentors, this will prove to be a more telling influence than any amount of mere verbal instruction without it. Let them but see what it does, and hat it works, and it will surely commend itself to them. The stamp of reality must surely make its appeal!

7) 1:10-14

Over against God's ideal, expressed in 8, 9, we have the other way, the way of folly, set in stark contrast. There is a recognition in these verses of the inevitability of conflict and temptation. For the life of wisdom and fear of the Lord is not the way of the world (cf a similar contrast in the conflict between light and darkness set forth in the Prologue to John's gospel), The writer is putting before us the eternal choice: this is the one way, he says in 8,), and here is the other, There is a strangely up-to-date ring about this temptation and pressure put on a young man to kick over the traces and cast in his lot with a spirit of lawlessness, violence and anarchy, to sit light to the principles of law and order. This is exactly how youngsters of today become involved in gangs and are led into mischief and criminal activity. The operative word is "entice" in 10; and the strength of the enticement lies in the glamour that it succeeds in imparting to the programme of evil in 11-14. It is always the false glamour that attracts, and stirs debased ambitions in the young. It is one of the tragedies of modern culture that the mass media somehow succeed in glamorising daring crimes and acts of lawlessness in such a way as to make such a life appear attractive and satisfying to youthful enthusiasms. If only some effective, way could be found to debunk the spurious glory that rests on daredevil and reckless defiance of law and order, and show it for what it is, mean, low, ugly and debased, and show also its inevitable consequences in the end-products of the ruin of homes and families, the broken hearts, the social, moral and spiritual degradation, a great and inestimable service would be rendered to society. A series on the mass media on the subject of "Crime does not pay" is long overdue!

8) 1:15-19

One of the specific factors in the enticement held out to this young man is the lure of easy money (14, 19). But then, society as a whole is guilty in this matter, for so much of modern life is geared to this very idea. Materialism is one of the great gods of our generation, and easy ways to quick wealth - whether via bingo, or the pools, or the stock exchange, or by overt criminal means - are sure to command instant attention. We recall a recent interview on the news media with a prominent sportsman (?) who had risen to the very top of his particular branch of sport and had been given a tumultuous welcome by thousands of adoring fans. When being questioned by the interviewer about his future, he stated quite simply and explicitly, "My only interest is in the money". Is this what sport is all about, then? An idol with feet of clay, indeed! And the tragedy is that thousands of young people think he is a wonderful guy, and will become infected with the same squalid spirit. What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

The father's appeal in these verses is to the young man's will. "Consent not" (10), "refrain" (15), he urges, pressing through all the glamour, and the appeal to the senses, to the will, the central citadel of life. He is claiming the young man's will for God. That is the important thing, and the need is to be clear-eyed here. It is possible to safeguard the will before the senses begin to overpower us. There is a point in temptation at which we can pull ourselves up, and not allow our senses to have sway over us. Let us never deceive ourselves into thinking otherwise. It is possible for those who name the name of Christ not to give consent to the forbidden suggestion; and when we do consent, it is always our own fault, whatever the extenuating circumstances. Hence the forthright challenge in the father's words here, made - we must always remember - within the context of the covenant. A covenant people always have resources sufficient for present need.

9) 1:20-23

What follows in these verses can be taken, in connection with 8-19, as supplementing and strengthening what the father has said to his son, or as underlying it - i.e., in the father's tender entreaty divine wisdom has in fact been speaking. It is certainly true that inasmuch and insofar as Christian parents are taking their responsibilities seriously under God, then when they speak to their children and instruct them, divine wisdom is speaking through them, for parents are in the place of God to their children, and they are the vehicles of the divine instruction. At all events, however, two things are clear: (1) Wisdom is personified here (this is the first of many passages in which this personification occurs), and it is not difficult to think in this connection of the Eternal Word made flesh in Christ. Here is Christ standing among men, appealing to them and saying, "My son, give me thine heart"; (ii) In relation to what has been said in 8-19, the offer of wisdom is made in down-to-earth situations to the man in the street, and for the business of living, as Kidner finely puts it. It is crying out where men are, in the hurly burly of life, in all its temptations and cynicisms and lawlessness. The implication is that men lapse into sin and evil ways in the face of wisdom and of an alternative way that is open to them. This is what makes them without excuse. We sense the note of urgency in wisdom's cry in 22, 23, as if the young man were on the point of yielding to the alluring blandishments of the way of folly. There is never, in fact, plenty of time in dealing with this kind of situation. "Resist beginnings" is always the best advice; and where this is not done, it is often already too late for anything effective to be done.

10) 1:20-23

The words used in 22, 23 to convey wisdom's reproof are interesting and revealing. "Simple" and "simplicity" are derogative terms: the Hebrew word means someone who is easily gullible, someone who is mentally naive and morally wilful and irresponsible, an easy prey to temptation; one whose instability could be rectified but who prefers not to accept discipline in the school of wisdom. There are many like this; they are not so much bad as irresponsible, and this is where their vulnerability lies. "Scorner" is a darker word. As Kidner puts it, "the mischief he does is not the random mischief of the ordinary fool, but the deeper damage of the "debunker" and deliberate trouble-maker. The "fool" is one who is dull and obstinate. It is impressive to see the fine shades of meaning that the Scriptures place upon the various kinds of folly that beguile and betray the hearts of men. This is in line with the basic distinction generally drawn in biblical revelation between those sins attributable to human frailty and those that are more "spiritual", i.e. those that are "purely" evil in essence. In fact, most human sin has an admixture of both: and it is when the "spiritual" more and more predominates over the wayward that the sin becomes more devilish and dangerous, the ultimate issue of this progression being the "sin unto death", or the "sin against the Holy Spirit", for which there is no forgiveness. The frightening thing about sin is that, even when it begins as the expression of waywardness and human frailty, it tends inevitably towards the other, more sinister, form when persisted in. This is a tendency that no man can control. Sin always becomes the master, once it is committed, and calls the tune.

11) 1:24-32

We see in these verses the reason for the note of urgency, which we commented on in Wednesday's Note; for the appeal of wisdom goes unheeded and, being unheeded, it leads to an inevitable nemesis. There is never plenty time: men can seek wisdom too late. It is possible to sin away the day of grace. The sentiments expressed in 26 ff are sometimes objected to on the grounds that they express a sub-Christian attitude, But this is to misunderstand them, for precisely the same emphasis is seen in the New Testament itself, as for example in Romans 1:24, 26, 28, where God is said to give up to a reprobate mind those who do not like to retain Him in their knowledge. This is exactly what is being said in these verses, it is not to be construed as arbitrary vengeance on God's part.: it is something that is inevitable. For this kind of refusal does something to a man: it shrivels his soul and renders him in the end incapable of turning. This is the meaning of 32: it is moral and spiritual suicide and self-destruction. In contrast, however, to this solemn possibility, we have safety, serenity and peace for those who hear and heed (33).

See, then, the complete picture: the father appeals to his son, applying the criterion of judgment: "Is this wisdom or folly?" And he draws out both in the lines that they will inevitably follow: the way of wisdom, discipline, training, leading to moral character and integrity; and the way of folly, with its glamour, excitement, and the thrill of kicking over the traces, leading however to the loss of the soul, And he says, "Look well, my son: I set before you life and death, Therefore choose life!"

12) 2:1-5

The emphasis in the opening part of this chapter is similar to that in 1:20 ff, and what is said is a counterpart to the earlier passage, There, wisdom was crying in the streets, clamouring to be heard, and therefore accessible to all, Here, two further thoughts are given us, (1) that wisdom is hard-won and must be diligently and eagerly sought (1-5); and (ii) that wisdom is God-given in the first, we are told how we must seek; in the second, what issues when we find. We should note, first of all, the double emphasis: in 1-5 it is earnest seeking and searching after wisdom on our part that is underlined, then in 6 we are told that it is God Who gives wisdom. There is no real contradiction here: discovery of wisdom and revelation of wisdom are inseparable. We would never discover anything unless God chose to reveal it to us. But the fact that God does reveal it does not make painstaking search unnecessary; revelation certainly does not mean sitting back and waiting for it to come, suspending one's mental processes of understanding and reason. That way lies shipwreck of faith: God reveals wisdom to us in and through painstaking search. It is, as we have already pointed out, a question of "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil 1:12, 13).

Next, we should observe where we are to seek for wisdom. We are not left in doubt about this. God gives His wisdom, as He gives the revelation of Himself, in His Word. We shall turn to a detailed consideration of this thought in tomorrow's Note.

13) 2:1-5

In 1, we can either take the speaker in the ultimate sense as being God, or - if it is a father speaking to his son - the father's words and his commandments are based upon God's word and law. In either case, we are brought back ultimately to the word of God. God has given us His Word, and it is there that we must concentrate our search for wisdom. We should note what this implies: the starting point of the search is divine revelation - specific (words) and practical (commandments). And there is no kind of warrant, in the search for wisdom, for speculation or wide-ranging enquiry, but rather, as Kidner puts it, for "treasuring and exploring received teachings so as to penetrate to their principles" (as the verbs used indicate: "receive", "hide", "incline", "apply", "cry", "Lift up they voice", "seek", "search"). These verbs are worth a second look, and we may consider them in pairs. The first of them, "receive" and "hide" set the tone. The word must be received, first of all. This is more than "hearing" it. You can hear, and forget: The sower, when he sowed the seed, let some fall by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it. It never got into the soil. And sometimes divine truth falls on the mind like seed on a beaten path, never penetrating the soil. The word must not only be heard, but also received, and laid up, or hidden in the heart. It is sometimes disturbing, when people come and ask questions about this or that problem or issue, to reflect that these very problems and issues were dealt with as recently as a few weeks earlier. The answer to them was in the Word preached; the questioner was there; he heard the message, but he did not receive it or hide it in his heart. He was thinking about something else at the time. It makes one think, does it not?

14) 2:1-5

The second pair of words, "incline" and "apply" speak of responsive-ness to what the Word is saying. An attitude of receptiveness to the Word leads to an inclination to receive its teaching more and more. So often our ear is inclined away from the Word by other interests, pursuits, concerns. But true inclination leads to a heart applied to divine wisdom. In the next pair, "cry" and "lift up thy voice" we see the progression of thought, with the thought and desire of the heart breaking out vocally. In the last pair, "seek" and "search", the desire intensifies. The seeking and searching are as for treasure. One recalls the "gold rush" in America in the late 19th century, and numerous treasure hunts since these give us some idea and indication of a determination that brooks no denial, and this is what is conveyed in these words as applied to the search for wisdom. If once men are convinced of its inestimable value, this is how they will set about looking for it. "If with all your hearts ye seek to know Me, ye shall ever truly find Me", thus saith the Lord. The result of this earnest seeking is stated in 5 - fear of the Lord, and knowledge of God: on the one hand, awe and reverence, on the other intimacy of fellowship. And never the one without the other. The biblical revelation has no place for any idea of intimacy of fellowship leading to familiarity. However intimate we may be with the Lord, He is still the Lord God Almighty, the Lawgiver, Maker of heaven and earth, and we His creatures. This must ever set bounds on any tendency to undue familiarity.

15) 2:6-9

In 1-5 it was the seeking; here it is the finding. It is the Lord that gives wisdom (6), and we are meant to understand from 1-5 that this is the way He gives it. One recalls in this connection the story of Christ's meeting with the Syro-Phenician woman (Matt 15:21 ff). The pattern unfolded in that remarkable story well illustrates the lesson Proverbs is teaching here, for the apparent rebuffs Jesus gave her served but to increase and intensify her determination to gain from Him the blessing she so earnestly sought the more difficult it seemed for her, the more resolutely she pursued her quest, until she came through to a place of such daring faith that nothing could have been denied her. And this was our Lord's intention with her from the beginning. So it is here: the progression unfolded in 1-5 from receiving the word to crying after knowledge, seeking it as for hid treasure has God at work in it from the outset, and it is in this context that He makes Himself known, To have the knowledge of God in this way is to know how to live, and sound wisdom marks our way, In possession of this we find a buckler, we are protected, and righteousness, justice, equity, every good path (9) become the characteristics of our lives, that is to say, an all-round integrity develops in us, This is the meaning here, There is great challenge in this. All too often there can be imbalance in our development: some develop intellectually, while remaining emotionally juvenile, and some develop emotionally but have lazy minds that are not prepared to think, and therefore become intellectual pygmies. Both these states indicate serious imbalance, and represent a sad condition. But "every good path" becomes the mark of the man who has found divine wisdom: He attains an all-round integrity.

16) 2:10-22

The theme of these verses is, to use Kidner's sub-title, "Wisdom, a moral safeguard". God's preserving grace has been mentioned in 7, 8, and now 10 and 11 show how God exercises that divine protection, and 12-15 and 16-19 illustrate the temptations over which that grace prevails. We look first, then, at 10, 11. There is something important here, and it is this: it is what a man is, and what he becomes, that will safeguard and protect him in temptation. This is God's way, God's intention in our lives to make us into the kind of people that can look temptation in the eye and dismiss it. In this, it is what we are or what we allow Him to make us - that counts. For example, it is the discretion of a discreet man that preserves him against being indiscreet, and it is a man's understanding that keeps him from making foolish mistakes in his relations with others, at home or at work. And if a man does not allow these disciplines mentioned here to control and shape him, then he will be indiscreet, and foolish, and make costly blunders all along the line, This has a good deal to say to us in the matter of guidance. As we shall read later, in 11:3, "the integrity of the upright shall guide them". This means that God is intent upon working into us an all-round integrity of life that will give us an unerring instinct as to what is right and what is wrong in any particular situation, This in no wise contradicts what is said in 3:5 about the danger of leaning on our own understanding, for the point that is being made is precisely that when God works in us an all-round integrity of life what we are leaning upon is His handiwork, not our own. We shall have more to say on this point when we come to 3:5.

17) 2:10-22

Such is the good (10, 11) that wisdom brings; we look, in what follows these verses, at the evil it prevents. Two dangers are spoken of here, and a twofold deliverance is promised, deliverance from the way of the evil man (12-15), and deliverance from the way of the "strange" woman (16-19). Wisdom makes us into a certain kind of person, to whom the talk, and the way of life, of evil and godless men will be unattractive and indeed foreign. The integrity of which the passage speaks will put a circle round us, to preserve us from the devious, twisted and perverse attitudes that are so much the hallmark and characteristic of godlessness. Nothing so effectively separates the believer from the unbeliever as this; there is the distinct and marked consciousness of belonging literally to another world, so different are the respective sets of values. The second deliverance is from the strange woman. The term "strange woman" has the force of "one who is outside the circle of a man's proper relations, that is a harlot or an adulteress", and here, the latter, for 17 refers to her husband ("the guide of her youth"). The "covenant" 17) which she has forgotten is not the marriage covenant as such, but the covenant with God expressed in the Ten Commandments, one of which - the seventh - she has explicitly broken by the way she is living. Once again, it is only integrity of life that can preserve a young man from such seductive danger. Only by being a certain kind of person can safety be ensured. Character is what saves and keeps, and enables a man to stand firm. This is why, ultimately, there is no effective substitute in the Christian life for the practice of exposing one's mind and heart constantly and regularly to the teaching of Scripture - there is no other way for this kind of integrity of character to be forged.

18) 3:1-10

This chapter continues the theme of wisdom and its value in life. Kidner's outline is a useful one to follow in its study. He says 'Whereas chapter 2 emphasised the moral stability which grows with wisdom, chapter 3 particularly promises serenity. This is seen as the fruit of a thoroughgoing godliness, three aspects of which mark the main divisions of the chapter: (i) Glad commitment (1-10); (ii) Patient quest (11-20); (iii) Quiet Integrity (21-35)." As to the first of these, we must underline something of very real importance at the outset, and it is this: Peace and serenity are not so much ends in themselves as the fruit of something else, and it is idle to desire them apart from and out of context with what alone can produce them, viz. , moral stability. It is putting the cart before the horse to preoccupy oneself with peace and serenity, although it is natural that one should long for them in the troubled world of our time, subject as it is to so many pressures of different kinds, It is wrong and indeed futile to seek them per se, and to make them one's aim in life. Our primary battle is for character, and when that is won, peace will be the result, The cultivation of moral integrity is what is of primary importance: when we are right there, our lives will develop a peace and order that will bless us day by day. Think of the things that usually rob us of peace -discouragement, uncertainty, fear, dread (some of these are mentioned later in the chapter), pressures of various kinds. Well, the message of Proverbs is that moral stability makes us into a certain kind of person, who will not be moved by these things. Hence the words in 1 about keeping the commandments of God. It is surprising to many to realise just how much of true Christian experience is made up of the very ordinary, mundane doing of one's duty in the sight of God!

19) 3:1-10

The notion of "direction" lies at the heart of the word "law" (torah). The law gives direction to our lives not so much through isolated "texts" that "come" into the mind, as by being absorbed over a long period of time into the very substance of our thinking. A mind, heart and life impregnated by the very atmosphere of Scripture and by its principles -this is what the writer has in view, This is an important consideration in the proper understanding of the well-known words in 5 on the subject of trusting the Lord, The word "trust" has here the force of resting one's weight upon something well able to give support, something that will never give way. The warning against relying on our own understanding is no ground for abdicating the duty to think things through: to trust in God with all one's heart means a life given over (in terms of 1) to His will and His Word, and in this condition, we will not lean on our own understanding, for in such a condition our understanding will be captive to God's will and Spirit, and will not be our own. We are only likely to rely on our own understanding when we are not thus captive, and trusting in God. But a mind captive to Him still thinks; indeed, it thinks with great clarity and reliability; and the thoughts it thinks are likely to be His thoughts. This is why we must maintain that "direction" from God is from the "inside", from and through our own "captive to God" thinking, rather than from the "outside". It is because our sanctification and development are never complete in this life that sometimes God has to intervene from the "outside", to keep us right. But in the ordinary process of development, leading from the "inside" is the ideal. Dependence on "outside" guidance is a sign of immaturity, and persistence in regarding it as "superior" is liable to lead to misleading and error. Paul says in 1 Cor 6:17, "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit": if this means anything, it means that, in vital union with Him, the thoughts we think are His thoughts.

20) 3:1-10

The thoughts in 7, 3, and in 9, 10, both flow from "acknowledge Him" in 6, which means "to know Him, and have fellowship with Him". To walk in fellowship with God means (a) to depart from evil and (h) to honour Him with our substance, to do right by Him in financial matters. The reference to being "wise in your own eyes", which could be paraphrased "Don't give yourself spiritual airs", is significant in the general context of the teaching of these chapters. It can hardly be accidental that there has been such an emphasis on a mundane, down-to-earth attitude to spiritual life, It is the very ordinariness of it that is so important because it stands over against the hankering after excitement and thrill that can be so fleshly a manifestation, Such a hankering is an indication of something not right in the spiritual life. Not so does spiritual health develop. Real stability comes through moral categories. The "honouring" in 9 is to be understood in terms of the general biblical emphasis on tithing (cf Malachi 3:10). It is possible to take these words in the wrong way. If the motive in tithing is really that our barns should be filled with plenty, this must surely be to dishonour, not honour, God. But if we honour Him with our substance out of love and gratitude to Him and a conscious sense that all we have we owe to Him, then God's promise is sure; "Them that honour Me I will honour". This is all part of the all round integrity of life spoken of earlier both moral and material realms are included within its compass.

21) 3:11-20

The link between 1:1, 12 and 13-18 is the thought that wisdom often comes through chastening and is won in the hard school of human experience. This is a theme which is recurrent in Scripture, and 11 and 12 are taken up and expounded in Hebrews 12:5-11. There, the chastening of the Lord brings forth the peaceable fruit of righteousness in those that are exercised thereby, and this "fruit" is described in this passage (13-18). The word "chastening" in the Greek of Hebrews 12 literally means "education". Chastening, we are meant to understand, is the "school" in which we are to learn wisdom (cf also Job 5: 1-7 ff), and this is why we are told not to despise the chastening of the Lord. The implication is that if we are really in earnest in our seeking after wisdom and after moral stability that produces peace and serenity, we must be prepared for a long haul in terms of discipline, and we may not and must not shirk it. We must not, on the one hand, despise it, in the sense of taking it lightly, or remaining blind to its meaning and purpose, failing to see the hand of God in it, or perhaps rejecting it in bitter resentment (the beneficent effects of chastening are not automatic, but depend on a right attitude being maintained to it); nor, on the other hand, must we be weary or faint under it, in the sense of going to pieces: when the pressure is upon us, but rather strive to see what, it is for in the blessed intention and purpose of God. How wholesome and practical this teaching is: To sit down with such a passage when we are under pressure, and let it speak to us and remind us that God's hand is in it, and that He is going to impart that little bit more wisdom through our suffering it, and that that wisdom is going to be 30 times more precious than all the things we could desire are not to be compared with it - surely this is both encouragement and comfort for us!

22) 3:11-20

The fruit of such hard-won wisdom is described in 13 ff. Lest we be too preoccupied with the material blessings spoken of here, we should particularly note what is said in 16. Doubtless there is an element of Hebrew parallelism in the verse, but it is perhaps significant that the purely material things are wisdom's "left-handed" gifts, while the "right-handed" gifts are the more intangible realities, the qualitative things. We sometimes speak of "left-handed" compliments, meaning those of lesser, or doubtful, value. This is the kind of metaphor that may be in view in these words. Riches and honour, although legitimate blessings, are not the highest or most important in life: the intangible realities are more important by far, more rewarding and more satisfying too, "a tree of life", as 18 puts it. One thinks of the rich young ruler in this connection: he had riches, honour and position, yet he was conscious of a great lack - he did not have access to any tree of life, and was therefore, in the deepest and truest sense, impoverished. The emphasis in 19 and 20 seems to suggest that wisdom is cosmic in its significance and importance. To get through to wisdom is to get through to the controlling principle of the universe. It is little wonder that the writer speaks of moral stability flowing from wisdom, for here is the great fountain-head of every kind of stability. And that immensity has come to touch the hearts of men in the word of grace. It is easy to make the transition from this to the Incarnation, and to Christ, in Whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He is our wisdom, and He dwells within us, by His Spirit. How wonderful!

23) 3:21-35

The "them" in 21 refers back to the "wisdom, understanding and knowledge" in 19, 20, which speak of "cosmic wisdom". There is an important association of ideas here. Wisdom is "walking with God" (23, 26) and this wisdom, or shrewdness, is something that comes from Him Who founded the earth. It is that cosmic wisdom that comes to us in walking with Him, mediated and distilled through the fellowship of the Spirit, to take possession of our hearts and souls. The fruit of this will be life and grace (22), that is, vitality and adornment. The combination of ideas here is significant. Sometimes in human experience the two qualities become divorced from one another. There is a kind of "graciousness" that is almost flabby and "wet"; it tends to "drip", but this is not the biblical brand and should not be mistaken for it True biblical graciousness or adornment has a strong and living quality about it, a pulse of vitality. It needs to be strong, because as 23 suggests and implies, the believer walks in the midst of difficulty, One does not speak of safety except in the context of danger, or of stumbling except in the context of the presence of obstacles, Life is no bed of roses, the writer implies, there are hazards and dangers at many points, but the man who walks in wisdom walks safely and his foot does not stumble, however many obstacles there may be.

24) 3:21-35

The reference to fear in 24-26 opens up considerations of wide application. When one thinks of the hundred -and-one nameless fears and dreads that prey upon the human spirit and produce such restlessness in it, these words constitute a wonderful promise. It may well be that what is described in these verses is not everyone's problem: it is certainly true that some more than others tend to become prey to sudden, irrational fears that can distress and even paralyse the spirit, and prove a positive hazard to health and even sanity, disturbing sleep rhythms and bringing nightmarish dreams (24). What is being taught here is that the man who is endued with divine wisdom and controlled and directed by it has become so balanced a personality that he is brought into a place of rest and peace in which these things do not disturb. How very wonderful that it should be possible through the grace of God and the discipline of His Word to be made into balanced personalities that can take the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", and all the pressures of life in one's stride, This is wholeness of personality indeed, and is what Paul must surely be referring to in his great word on sanctification in 1 Thess 5:23, The RSV translates 25b "neither of the ruin of the world" - this echoes the thought of Psalm 46:2, This is the measure of peace that is given to those who find a refuge and strength in God. If this, then, be the extent of the promise, should we be content with less, for our own experience?

25) 3:21-35

Of the last verses of the section (27-35), Kidner says, "The genuineness of the trust (1-12) and wisdom (13-26) already expounded will be proved by love. So the chapter closes with samples of what it means to know God 'in all thy ways'(6)". In other words do not let us have any talk about trusting in the Lord if in fact we withhold good from them to whom it is due. Do not let us by hypocrites, says the writer, If we trust in the Lord, if we think wisdom is ours, then this is how it should express itself, Once again, there is the basic emphasis on down-to-earth, practical behaviour is it not so often in this realm that we tend to fall down in Christian living? The marginal rendering of 27a, "the owners thereof" indicates that it is not merely inconsiderateness that is involved here, but injustice. We are holding on to what is not ours to hold. We can also usefully link the thought here with Paul's in Romans 13:7, 8, "Owe no man anything but to love on another", This, paradoxically, is a debt that we are always paying, and can never pay to the full in 29 it is the abuse of one's neighbour's trust that is condemned: "seeing he trusts you implicitly". We have a graphic example of this betrayal of trust in Psalm 55. The abuse of trust is a grave and terrible sin, for it is a sin against love. The circumstances in which one might be tempted to envy the oppressor (31) would be if he were seeming to get away with it; but this is a short-lived respite for him, for the Lord's displeasure is upon him even in his hour of seeming prosperity, and the curse will out and fulfil itself in due time (33). God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap (Gal 6:7).

26) 4:1-9

Even a cursory reading of these verses gives a clear impression of the greatness of the thought they express, and this is underlined in a closer study of them. Three generations are mentioned in 1,3, children, father and grandparents, and this bears witness to what may be called the entail of grace, God blesses to the third and fourth generation, when parents fulfil their vows and their stewardship in faithfulness and love. In this sense, parents lay the foundation of many generations in the way they bring up their children. This should be an enormous encouragement to us, as well as a challenge. One thinks of some prominent families in the Christian Church, such as the Booth family, or Hudson Taylor's, in which this principle has been abundantly displayed. Here, the writer, who is now a father himself, is passing on the same instruction to his own son as he himself received when a boy. It is said that you do not know whether you have been a good parent until you see how your children set about bringing up theirs if they follow a different pattern, they are passing a vote of no confidence in how you brought up them" That is something worth thinking about. At all events, there is a man who was so conscious that his father brought him up in the right way that he can think of no higher or better way of instructing his own son. The emphasis in this instruction is, interestingly, very positive - not that there are no negatives involved (cf 3:27-31). It is a love of good things that is being inculcated, and this is done by parental example and, by love. The father's enthusiasm for the things he commends, and his sincerity, are very obvious: he is given over to them himself. Here is the secret: if the things of God are a reality in a parent's life, if they really shine through in the down-to-earth situations of the home, so that the true, spiritual life is natural, easy and free, children will recognise the reality, and respond and learn by that example to love as his father loves.

27) **4:1-9**

The words "love her" in 6 raise an important consideration. In the course of learning any discipline, there is a stage at which the predominant awareness is of necessity that of hard slogging, and duty rather than delight is the keynote. In the early stages of language study, the hard chore of learning the construction of Latin verbs can be irksome and discouraging, it is only much later that the beauty and cadences of Virgil's hexameters captivate the mind, so that we sit down with the Aeneid and read it with the same delight that we experience with Wordsworth or Browning. It is like this also learning to play the piano: the early years of practice can be so much drudgery, with very little to show for it, but there come; a time when things become very different, and the hard slog to attain proficiency gives way to a new experience; suddenly we are into wide open spaces, and a new world of enchantment and delight. This is certainly true also in spiritual life: we graduate, and come of age. And this is what this father desires for his son, in these verses. A word of qualification may perhaps be added here however, from a pastoral point of view. Sometimes the delight in spiritual realities can fade, or be occluded for a season, Bible study and prayer lose their glow and attraction, and the soul passes into a darkness that can be very desolating, What is one to do in such a situation? It does not mean that there has been spiritual backsliding, it may be that physical exhaustion and weariness have caused the condition, or depression, or some other such condition. But whatever the cause; the, prescription is plain and clear. it is our duty to maintain open lines of communication with the Lord, and in the fulfilment of duty (however little like it we may on occasion feel) peace can come; and duty will once again ultimately lead us into delight. This is something very important for us to learn in spiritual life.

28) 4:10-19

An important point emerges when we read between the lines in 10-13. The reaching and instruction of wisdom implies a response in those who are taught (as 'receive' in 10 indicates). But in point of fact, there are some who are not really amenable to instruction. Their minds are closed because they think they know better. This attitude regrettably obtains even in Christian people at times, especially when they claim direct inspiration by the Spirit of God, and direct access to His guiding, and scorn to listen to any "human" advice. This is a plausible attitude from the spiritual point of view only until some thought is given to it. What they conveniently forget is that God's guidance so often comes through the distilled wisdom of wise and mature people, in just the way that the writer indicates in these verses, and that He makes known His will to His children through such appointed means, This not only does not contra-dict what is said in 3:5 (see earlier Note), but in fact is its truest expression, It is the acquirement of wisdom that makes people wise enough to know and discern God's will in any particular situation, and such wisdom is characterised, not by a closed mind, but by sweet reasonableness that is prepared to listen.

29) 4:10-19

The earnest exhortation in 15 makes sound sense. None of us is so strong as to dabble with the forbidden thing in the mistaken supposition that we will not be contaminated. To give it a wide berth is the safest course (cf 1 Cor 10;12), The two paths are contrasted in 18, 19. Bridges has a fine comment on 18: "This is a fine picture of the Christian's path of light, in contrast with the dark and dangerous path of the wicked, It is not the feeble wasting light of a taper, not the momentary blaze of the meteor; but the grand luminary of heaven, 'coming out of his chamber, and rejoicing as a strong man to run his race' (Ps 19:5), from earliest dawn to noon-day glory. And a beautiful sight it is to see the soul thus rising out of darkness, beginning his course; rising higher and higher; taking in a wide circle; advancing onward with increasing brightness unto the perfect day. Knowledge - faith - love - holiness - irradiate every step. It is at first but a glimmering ray - the first dawn of day. But 'following on' - the eye becomes more unveiled; the heart more enlightened; the truth more vividly impressed upon the conscience; the 'understanding' more quick 'in the feat of the Lord'; the taste more discerning between good and evil, Faith now becomes more strong in the Saviour's love, more simple in the promises of God. Subjection to the Redeemer's sceptre is more unreserved; love rises to a higher estimation, to a closes union with Him - to a more intimate complacency in Him, Experience may be confused. But light will clear away the mists. Practice in some points may be inconsistent. But 'beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord we are changed into his image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord' (2 Cor 3:18). Such is the godly man. Such is his path."

30) 4:20-27

The message that these verses impress upon the mind is surely that the price of continuing victory, and indeed of any kind of balance, in spiritual life is continuing and unceasing vigilance, The all-round nature of this vigilance is underlined by the reference to the various parts of the body - ear, eyes, heart, mouth, feet, This reminds us of Paul's famous appeal in Romans 12:1, 2, to present our bodies a living sacrifice. Here, the writer spells out the meaning of such a consecration, Paul of course meant that our whole being was to be dedicated to God. But the reason he used the word "bodies" is that the business of consecration is to be a reality; not a theory, God has no time for a "disembodied" consecration, Consecration in principle is not enough. The following words by Chrysostom make the point well: "How is the body to become a sacrifice? Let thine eye look on no evil thing, and it hath become a sacrifice, let thy tongue speak nothing filthy, and it hath become an offering; thy hand do no lawless deed, and it hath become a whole burnt-offering, But this is not enough, we must do good works also; let the hand do alms, the mouth bless them that despitefully use us, and the ear find leisure evermore for the hearing of Scripture. For sacrifice can be made only of that which is clean, sacrifice is a first fruit of other actions, Let us, then, from our hands, feet, and mouth, and all our other members, yield a first fruit unto God".

31) 5:1-6

Bearing in mind the fact that in the first nine chapters of Proverbs we have what amounts to an exposition of the 'text' given in 1:7: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge', in a series of fatherly talks which illustrate and press home the fateful choice to be made between wisdom and folly, we have, next in order, a chapter dealing with wisdom about marriage. It divides into three sections, the first of which occupies us in these verses. There are several lessons to be gathered from this graphic picture of the 'strange woman' or seductress. For one thing, here is a realm in which it is important for a young man to listen to an older person's advice and counsel, for the very good reason that it is a realm where it is so easy to lose one's perspective. There is a blind spot in so many minds in this kind of situation, and it becomes absolutely imperative to have objective assessments given us. God will certainly guide us through others' views here: For another thing, we should note the contrast between 'thy lips' in 2 and 'her lips' in 3. What is said in 2 will prove to be a protection and safeguard against the temptation. If our speech is true, we are likely to be true, and will therefore 'see through' the false and specious flattery that leads the unwary and gullible to disaster. This means that the criterion of judgment is sound spiritual sense and wisdom rather than emotional feelings. Reason, rather than emotion, must be the touchstone, in this as in so many other things. But more of this in tomorrow's Note.

32) 5:1-6

It is interesting to note in this picture that it is the man that is being led astray. But what is said surely applies equally the other way round. Is it unknown for a girl to be completely fooled by a specious philanderer, and for the same reasons? 'Her end' in 4 refers to the inevitable 'afterwards' of such an involvement, Kidner has an interesting comment here: 'The first simile of 4 helps us to recognise even marginal unchastity, by its bad aftertaste to the conscience; the second shows that there is more than disenchantment to be faced. This becomes explicit in 5'. This will bear thinking about. Sometimes young folk ask, 'What is wrong with 'kissing' or 'petting'? Well, what does this passage seem to suggest, in its emphasis on 'lips', if not that this is where all the trouble starts? The meaning of 6 (following the AV which scholars think is more faithful to the original than the RSV) seems to be that the seductress's ways are 'moveable', i.e. slippery and unstable in order to keep serious thought at bay. Always the play on emotions and feelings rather than thought. She knows, and the devil knows, that when the mind is in control, the temptation is going to be foiled, The RSV rendering - 'her ways wander, and she does not know it' bears witness to something all too common in spiritual life. There is the kind of person who flits from one thing to the next in spiritual things; they never settle down, there is always some new thing, and they are victims of every impulse, leading themselves and others a merry dance, which they generally blame on the Spirit of God: 'God guided me to do this, God guided me to do that'. They must have a very strange God: Such people are rarely mature. And they are a potential menace to those with whom they come in contact.

33) 5:7-14

A note of urgency rings in 7, as if the writer felt he was almost fighting a losing battle trying to get the young to listen to wisdom. At all events, the warning is categorical and unmistakable: the only safe way is to give the seductress a wide berth. 'Keep away from her'. This is the advice Paul gives Timothy: 'Flee youthful lusts' (2 Tim 2: 22), i.e. 'Don't get into situations that will give them free reign, and lead to temptation and seduction'. Kidner has a graphic comment here: 'This could mean, in terms of detailed decision, e.g. "change your job", "change your newspaper", "break with that set of friends". One reason why people get into such snorrels of temptation and failure is that they simply ask for trouble, walking into it with both feet, putting themselves into situations in which it is a foregone conclusion that they will be tempted. The picture in 9 ff is a grim one, with its sorry tale of disgrace, wasted years (9), blackmail, homes wrecked, families wrecked, prospects wrecked, and everything worthwhile gone by the board - with endless regret and remorse eating at heart and conscience for not having listened to instruction and advice. There is something important to note here. More and more, one encounters the kind of attitude represented in 12 - an attitude of mind and heart in which people are simply not amenable to reason - and this not only in the emotional realm, but in other even more serious spiritual realms. They have all the convictions of fanaticism, their minds are closed, and nothing that anyone can say seems for the moment to bear any weight with them. It is only later - often much later, and sometimes too late - that they see what fools they have been, and wish desperately that they had listened. There is something almost demonic in this: when a mind is closed to the point of fanaticism, the devil is at work, and an enchantment has come upon it. We need to remember that the biblical testimony is that even in the highest flights of spiritual exaltation the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, and minds are not closed to reason,

All this is written for our admonition. This is why there is such a consistent emphasis in Proverbs on listening to instruction.

34) 5:15-23

The closing verses of the chapter portray fidelity as the more excellent way. The AV and RSV translate 16 differently. The metaphor in both renderings concerns chastity and fidelity, and the sanctity of home and family life. If the RSV is followed, - 'Should your springs be scattered abroad...?' - what is referred to is the wastefulness of promiscuity and loose living (in terms of 9 ff). But the AV is probably truer to the original - 'Let thy fountains be dispersed abroad', and the meaning is that fidelity within the marriage bond is not a dull and impoverishing experience, but one that is productive of rich influences for society in general. This is an important and significant picture, and one which needs to be displayed with great prominence today, and communicated to our young generation groping so uncertainly in the morass of our sick society. What a word this is to give the lie to the squalid portrayal by the mass media of marital infidelity as something exciting and thrilling and the 'in' thing! We are often far too apologetic about the Christian way of life, as if it were something feeble and dull, instead of the healthful, invigorating and even exhilarating experience that is everywhere portrayed in the Scriptures. A dull Christian is really a contradiction in terms!

35) 5:15-23

Some are embarrassed at the plainly erotic language in 18 ff, reminiscent as it is of so much in the Song of Solomon (whose first meaning, let it be clear, is that it expresses erotic love between a man and his wife). But it is a measure of the 'un-health' of our modern thinking that we should be so embarrassed. The biblical testimony is very healthy and very 'earthy', in the good sense of that word. If marriage is honourable, as Heb. 13:4 insists, then the kind of delight portrayed in these verses is surely God-given, and there is no reason for the introduction of gloomy taboos within the divinely appointed order of things. There is certainly little sign here of the 'down-trodden wife' idea of olden days, when women tended to be regarded more as goods and chattels than as companions and partners. On the contrary, the picture is one of mutual delight and caring. This is what the father sets over against the ugly and the sordid for his son, adding force and point to the 'Why' in 20. Why indeed he soiled and ruined on such a path, when such a glorious alternative beckons? Behind and beyond all the practical warnings against a dissolute life, however, there is man's accountability to God for the way he lives (21), and the fact that there is an inherently self-destructive element in sin (22). God is not mocked, as Paul solemnly puts it in Gal 6:7; 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap'. How needful, then, that we should look ahead to the consequences that are likely to follow our actions. Difficult to do, yes when you are infatuated, when the mind is not amenable to instruction; but God's Word hammers it home: Look to the end, and see where this will lead you. This is the message of the chapter.

36) 6:1-5

Kidner entitles this chapter as 'Pitfalls for the Unwary'. It divides into five unequal sections, seemingly disconnected with one another but, as we may see, having an underlying unity. The idea of being surety for another is one that figures prominently in Proverbs, as we see from 11:15, 17:18, 20:16, 22:26, and 27:13. To be a surety is to stand good for someone, to enter into a solemn pledge with a creditor that you will be responsible if the debtor (for whom you have stood surety) is unable to pay up at the appointed time. It is to be a guarantor, and the phrase 'to strike hands' is like our modern idea of shaking hands on a deal. The warning is not so much against standing surety for another in any circumstances whatever as against heedless and ill-advised action that will lead to trouble. It is prudence that is advocated - not a prudence that banishes generosity and makes one mean, but an attitude that refuses to succumb to an easy-going thoughtlessness that leads to rash expressions of generosity that one does not feel, and may be made from an ulterior motive - the desire to be thought generous, or affluent, to be thought the right kind of person, or such like. It is possible to enter into a suretyship of this nature 'through, an unconscious desire to 'act the big man', even when not in a position financially to do so. When this happens, becoming liable for the debt puts not only the man concerned, but also his family, into jeopardy. Not only so: it is bad also for the one for whom he performs this 'service', for this reason: it encourages him in irresponsible ways. When one thinks of the many hire-purchase agreements, for example, that go by default, and the financial embarrassment, not to say entanglements, caused to the hapless guarantors, one sees the practical wisdom of this warning; and the humiliation involved in extricating oneself in time from such liabilities is not too great a price to pay for learning prudence and sense for the future.

37) 6:6-11

Prudence is a commendable virtue, and is taught us by the ants. This is the link with the previous section Improvidence is not the same as faith; it is the grossest presumption to act the part of the sluggard, and then to expect divine provision in the hour of need. Diligence and carefulness are both commanded and commended by the Lord, and both alike honour Him. To revert to the illustration in yesterday's Note, people who become bogged down with hire-purchase payments show a certain improvidence and impracticality in their daily living; their danger, like the sluggard's, is that of wanting it both ways: wanting to be improvident now, and provident for the future too. From another standpoint, and in a different connection, it may be thought that prudence in laying up for the future militates against the idea of living by faith, but there is a confusion in such thinking. It cannot be an evidence of lack of faith, because prudence comes under the providence of God, and is prompted by that providence. It is a different matter if a man sets store by riches. But true prudence is the fruit of a diligent spirit. Industriousness is the prevailing characteristic in the ant; and when this characterises a man's life, he will not be too keen to have another stand surety for him. He will be too independent. And a good thing too: There is a lot to be said for the attitude that characterised our forebears, by which they accepted as a matter of course - and as a matter of principle that you did not buy anything until and unless you could afford it, and that if you wanted it, you worked hard to save and sacrifice for it, for months, and even years, if need be. It was assuredly a better and more satisfying way to live - and more scriptural too!

38) 6:12-19

The man who is careless about his own affairs, whether asking for surety or giving it, may well be the kind of person who will be tempted to interfere altogether too much with the affairs of others. Irresponsibility in business matters is not likely to be confined to the business realm, but will spill over into the rest of life. We should note the implied progression in these three sections of the chapter: in 1-5, easygoing thoughtlessness; in 6-11, laziness and slothfulness; and now here, troublemaking and mischief. Is it not remarkable how these characteristics mark so much of modern life today? Can it be a coincidence that this sequence is so evident in the industrial scene at the present time? The connection of 16-19 with 12-15 is indicated in 19. The man of 12-15 is the worst of the seven abominations in the eyes of the Lord. We should note particularly the reference to the various parts of the body in these verses -mouth, eyes, feet, fingers, heart in 12-14, and eyes, tongue, hands, heart, feet, lips in 17-19. These should be compared and contrasted with those mentioned in 4:20-27 (see Note for Wednesday, August 12th). The father is setting the contrasts and the alternatives before his son, and reminding him that his members can be given to the service of good or evil, and in showing him in each case what these alternatives lead to and end, urges him to choose wisdom rather than folly. One old commentator suggests there may be a parallel between the seven abominations in :17-19 and the Beatitudes in Matthew. It may be reading more into the text than is there to suggest that Jesus may have had this passage in mind when He preached the Sermon on the Mount, but it is at least striking and significant to notice that a proud look is the antithesis of being poor in spirit, and sowing discord among brethren the antithesis of being peacemakers.

39) 6:20-23

The one effective antidote to the moral and spiritual declension mentioned in 1-19 is found in cleaving to God and His Word. This is why the words in 20, 21 are repeatedly echoed in the first nine chapters of Proverbs. As we have seen, 'father's commandment' can be taken both literally and spiritually, for in fact, inasmuch as children are brought up faithfully to God, their parents' instruction is as the word of God to them. We should note that there is no thought of a generation gap here, indeed the opposite; and when the exhortation is heeded, the promise of God is sure, and a certain kind of experience will result: led by the Word, kept by the Word, communion by the Word (22). The first assurance is basic: we shall be led in God's way, and that leading will be sure; mind and spirit will be so saturated with divine teaching that the divine will and directive will become 'second nature' to us. The idea of being 'kept during sleep' is intriguing: it may simply refer to protection from danger from without (from enemies, and such like) during the hours of rest; but it may surely also be taken to mean that if our waking hours are spent in obedience to the word of God, our sleeping hours will be blest, not only in terms of reasonable rest and refreshment, but also of being undisturbed by lawless thoughts and dreams; furthermore, God's continuing work will go on unhindered in our lives. He Who keeps Israel slumbers not nor sleeps, but continues His work in us while we do, if our hearts have been towards Him in obedience during the day. That is a comforting pillow to go to rest on! And when we wake, He is there, whispering in our ear, blessing us in the fellowship of His Spirit. The living Word a glorious reality to us from our first waking thoughts in the morning. This is the heritage of those that heed the voice of wisdom (20, 21).

40) 6:20-23

We should not miss the significance of the description of the law of God as lamp and light, in 23. The implication is surely that the law is not bondage, but liberty. To think of it in restrictive terms is to misunderstand it. It is true that in the contrast that is sometimes presented between law and grace it has this meaning; but when the Old Testament speaks of the law as it does in these verses, it has no reference to legalism at all, but speaks rather in terms of the glorious liberty of the children of God. This is the force of the last statement in 23 'reproofs of instruction are the way of life'. Such reproofs might seem to be in their essence restrictive, but it is a mistaken idea to suppose so. A horse might think the bit and bridle to be restrictive of its liberty, but in fact the control and discipline they place upon it brings out the best in the animal. The law, with its reproofs of instruction, does exactly the same, rightly understood. You will always, of course, on occasion find a horse that refuses the bit and bridle; and there are those people who cannot stand correction; but the future is never very bright for such. For those, however, who can take correction, and stand reproof, there is almost no limit to the advance that can be made in the spiritual life.

41) 6:24-35

The purifying influence of the word of God is the only adequate safeguard and protection against the kind of snare spoken of in 25 ff. We should not miss the significance, in this connection, of the emphasis on 'the heart' in 2b; keep the heart, resist beginnings; for the one whose heart is not governed by the sanctifying truth of God is an unhappy man indeed. To trifle in this realm is ultimately to be overcome. It is not possible to play with fire, even in the heart and imagination (2'7), and not be burned. If he thinks it, does he really believe that it will stop at his thoughts? It may be asked why there is such a considerable emphasis on the sins of impurity in these chapters the next chapter continues the theme with a graphic illustration of these verses). One reason is this: generally, in times of great pressure in society - and this is something we are particularly conscious of today - when there seems to be a general attack all round on accepted values, and a general undermining of standards of behaviour, it is particularly in the sensitive areas of human life that the effect of such an attack is most markedly seen. It is the potential weak spots that tend to suffer most under pressure. This is true of any kind of pressure and any kind of excess, even in the religious realm, as the history of revival sometimes shows, when extremes have been known to lead to gross immorality. The meaning in 31 ff is that theft or burglary is a relatively straightforward matter, with straightforward consequences, but adultery is destructive of the soul, it does something to a man that no other sin does. This is the difference between this kind of sin and all other kinds see 1 Cor 6:13 ff).

42) 7:1-5

This chapter continues the discussion begun in 6:20-35, and presents it in dramatic form. One recognises that the discussion of a subject of this nature might be painful and embarrassing to sensitive spirits, and it might be thought that it is inapplicable to one's present circumstances. This is fair comment, but over against it, two things may be said: the first is that we may never know when it might become a very real issue and temptation, and we can never be too careful; secondly, it is open to us to spiritualise the message here, as is done, for example in the book of Revelation, and in the Old Testament prophets, where literal and spiritual adultery are frequently linked together in such a way that it is often impossible to be sure which is being referred to in any particular instance. Kidner suggests the following analysis of the chapter: first of all, a prologue (1-5), followed by the unfolding of the drama in 6-23, with a picture of the victim, the huntress, her tactics, and the kill; and finally, 24-27, a short epilogue. We shall look at it in this light, seeking to learn its solemn lessons, bearing in mind that these things are written for our admonition.

43) 7:1-5

The prologue begins with the now familiar appeal from the father to the son to keep the commandments and the law, to keep which is life (2). The use of the metaphor of 'the apple of the eye' seems to suggest that the matter is something so sensitive that it dare not be damaged without detriment to the whole of life. This keeping of the law must, moreover, be something that goes to the very heart of our being -only thus to the gracious provisions of the law, its strengthening and protective power, become available for instant and instinctive application (3). The metaphor here is a fruitful one - to be so gripped and suffused by the teaching of God's word that we will never be at a loss to what is right to do, because we will have it at our fingertips, ready at hand in every moment of crisis. There is obviously a contrast intended in 4 and 5 between the sister who is wisdom and the seductress who flatters with words. The man who calls wisdom his sister will give the other a wide berth. Many a man has had cause to thank God for the moderating and engracing influence that a sister has had upon his life. This is the kind of idea that lies behind these words. After all, in the time of need a sister is someone one can turn to, and a kinswoman one from whom one can expect help. And in the kind of situation represented in these verses, this sister is an indispensable necessity!

44) 7:6-9

These verses portray the victim in the drama: 'a young man without sense 'RSV). Let us take a good look at him, to see what he is about. He is out on the street, passing along near her corner. He is restless and unsettled, instead of being somewhere, and doing something constructive. There is a lesson here. We need to beware of this kind of restless 'wanderlust'. We are all conscious of it from time to time. it is almost like a distemper of spirit, but we would never deny the strength of it, because it sometimes seems to take control of us. We must be out: we cannot sit down at home: we are driven to movement, restless, aimless movement. There is surely a potential for harm in this: because, when such a spirit grips us, as Kidner puts it, place 8) and time 9) can join forces against us, and temptation and opportunity come together. When they do, God help us if we are in such a mood, for we shall certainly fall. Sometimes temptation comes when opportunity is lacking; and sometimes opportunity comes when the temptation is not particularly strong; in both which cases we are relatively safe. But when temptation and opportunity, place and time, all coincide, then but for the sovereign, over-ruling grace of God, disaster will surely result. Such situations are predictable in the long run for some people: the indiscipline of their lives, their failure to seek wisdom, their neglect of the ways of God -all these combine to set their feet on the way that leads into big trouble He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.'

45) 7:10-23

Next we have the picture of the seductress, and a description of the tactics she employs to ensnare her hapless prey. She also is restless (12) but hers is the restlessness of the evil one 'going about seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet 5:8). Kidner's terse analysis can hardly be bettered: 'First, comes shock treatment (13); second, a circumstantial story - it is a special day, a celebration; it would be unthinkable to refuse (14); third, flattery: he is the very one she had to find (15); fourth, sensuous appeal (16-18); fifth, reassurance (19, 20). The whole is pressed home with a flood of words (21). 'Straightway' in 22 is better rendered, as in RSV, as 'all at once', the idea being that up to a point he has been indecisive, then all at once that indecision yields to the seduction of lust, and he follows her, not knowing that it will cost him his life (23). The important thing in all this distasteful picture is to see how such a tragedy takes place. It is all enacted on the level of the senses. There is no exercise of the mind or the understanding from beginning to end. He is a young man without sense (7), i.e. he lives by his feelings, and feelings are the only criterion to which he will give heed or credence, They are his final court of appeal, He is not prepared to listen to any reasonable advice or warning, indeed, he is not amenable to it. One has generally to wait until the mad fit has passed over before any heed will be given - and often, alas, it is too late then for much to be done, except in terms of a sad salvage operation. This is just as true in the spiritual parallel as in the literal, and in tomorrow's Note we will look at the lessons for spiritual life in this picture.

46) 7:10-23

The literal infatuation spoken of in these verses is sometimes paralleled in spiritual situations, as when young and impressionable people are influenced and swayed by a strong-minded personality in such a way that they 'go overboard' in some dangerous or mad excess, sometimes to the peril of their souls and of their sanity. One has known of women of magnetic personality, strong and masterful, assuming and arrogating to themselves an authority and leadership in spiritual things that Scripture says belongs properly to man, and gathering round themselves numbers of easily-led (and even more easily-misled) people and exercising an undue authority over them detrimental to their truest spiritual welfare. And, of course, the fascination in such a situation is a paramount factor - it is a fascination absent from the regular provision of the established means of grace, because the latter is not concerned to fascinate, but to build up: children will always be more attracted by sweets and ice-cream than by porridge, meat and potatoes, but sensible parents know which is better for their children's true welfare. Christians who hanker after spiritual titillations in preference to honest-to-goodness, down-to-earth nurture are really showing themselves to be like the young man 'without sense' in the passage before us, and are lacking in gumption. If the message of Proverbs could be learned at depth by Christian young people today, it would deliver them from both the literal and spiritual danger underlined in these verses, and would keep them anchored and give them balance in spiritual life. Which brings us back to the truth expressed in 1-5 which some of us have come to believe, in our ministry, that there is no substitute for a steady diet of the word of God.

47) 7:24-27

The last verses of the chapter give a solemn epilogue to the tragedy that has been unfolded, and the father, reminding his son that it is something he has actually seen happening, and no figment of the imagination (6,7), gives him final counsel. He must resist beginnings by setting a watch on his mind ('heart' in AV has the force of 'mind' and includes the thoughts). There is danger as soon as the thoughts go in this direction, and this is where battle must be joined. When we fail here, it is only a matter of time before thought becomes action. 'Sow a thought, reap an act' proves very true in this realm. Furthermore, he must keep away literally, as well as in thought, giving the place of danger a wide berth. Sometimes people simply ask for trouble! There is no point in praying 'Lead us not into temptation' when we deliberately walk into the midst of it. The father's last word is to urge upon his son (26, 27) the inevitable outcome of such a path, showing the statistics of casualties. This should surely be a powerful deterrent. There is nothing in the world so desolating for a Christian minister to have to say to someone, 'I know where this road ends: it ends in shipwreck; it is going to do untold harm; please believe me, for I have seen it happening', recounting instances of it to unheeding ears, and seeing such an one going their way to a predictable end. Some people seem determined to learn only the hard way, but is it not infinitely better to heed the testimony of Scripture? We often make things much more difficult for ourselves than they need be.

48) 8:1-5

After the solemn and indeed frightening emphasis of the past two chapters, it is almost a relief to come to this admittedly 'high-water mark' of the book of Proverbs - the wonderful delineation and personification of wisdom. We must bear in mind that wisdom has been the main theme of the introductory section of the book (chapters 1-9). Repeatedly it has been held up as something wonderfully desirable and urgently necessary in life, and always the emphasis on the mind and reason rather than on feelings or emotions. And now we have this sublime personification of wisdom in one of the most exalted passages in all the Old Testament. It is impossible not to read into it what the New Testament says about Christ being 'made unto us wisdom' (1 Cor 1:30); in the latter half of the chapter the 'identification' becomes irresistible (comparison should be made with Paul's words in Col 1:16 ff and 2:3). Kidner's analysis of the chapter is, as always, helpful as a guide to study: Wisdom is the would-be guide of Everyman (1-5); the partner of morality (6-13); the key to all success (14-21); the very principle of creation (22-31); and the one necessity of life (32- 36). The picture in the opening verses is of wisdom down among men, in the streets, where they are - a down-to-earth reality, on the initiative to seek men and impart to them its treasures, appealing to them to heed the voice that entreats them. It is not something remote, and inaccessible except to the few, but readily available to all. Since this is so, the implication is clear: lack of wisdom is culpable and inexcusable in us. If we are still unwise, we have turned to our own way when wisdom was at hand for us. One is reminded of the words quoted from Deuteronomy by Paul in Romans 10:8 about the righteousness by faith: 'The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart', not far off and difficult of access. It is there for the taking, nay more, thrusting itself upon men. This is why Israel was so inexcusable - all day long God had held out His hands to a disobedient and perverse people. This is how it is with wisdom.

49) 8:1-5

The fact that wisdom is here represented as coming down, as it were, in to the marketplace means that this divine wisdom is relevant there - at street-level, to use Kidner's phrase. It is there for the right ordering of daily life, for down-to-earth activities. The true spiritual life is meant to be a life lived out on down-to-earth levels, in the common days of life. Spiritual life does not always appear like this, however: there is a spiritual experience that is too heavenly minded to be of much earthly use, and the Scriptures will have none of it. Incarnation means 'down-to-earth' and divine wisdom is incarnate, down-to-earth wisdom, and when it becomes embodied in a human life, it is in down-to-earth wisdom and practicality that it expresses itself. This is a good test for us: does our spirituality make impact on everyday levels? The question is not whether we are wise in relation to our understanding of the doctrines of the faith, although this is very important; it is whether we are wise in our application of these doctrines to daily life, in human relationships, in day to day converse and intercourse with men and women, in the shop, in the market place, in daily work. Are we the kind of people who on the practical levels of life are simply scatter-brained? The wisdom that this father is exhorting his son to obtain is as relevant to the daily minutiae of ordinary life as to anything else, and it is available even to the simpleton (5), for ordinary, down-to-earth situations and places in life; practical and absolutely relevant. Is not this something very refreshing and hopeful and encouraging?

50) 8:6-13

The second section of the chapter relates wisdom with a good and strong moral sense. Divine wisdom is wed indissolubly to strict morality: therefore, whenever and wherever there is an emphasis in spiritual life which holds ordinary morality at a discount, something terribly wrong is taking place. One recalls the story of the Christian woman guilty of having told a lie, who when challenged about it said, 'I do not feel as if I have done anything very wrong'. Ordinary morality at a discount indeed! Telling a lie is not a little thing, it is a breach of divine truth. One of the tests of reality in Christian profession, according to 1 John, is keeping the commandments of God, and the man who claims to love God but does not keep His commandments is deceiving himself, because his spiritual experience is divorced from common morality. It is never unnecessary to underline this, for there are always some who sit light to the dictates of common morality when they are concerned about spiritual experience, brushing it aside as of less account than what they deem to be the weightier matters of spiritual exaltation. But we may not brush aside the ethics of the Divine character as being of little importance: we do not understand anything aright if we do not recognise that in the Divine standard there is an absolute straightness from which we dare not deviate. If we were to ask the question. Where is such wisdom come by? There can be but one answer: in the Scriptures, God's written Word. This requires to be stressed over against alternative ways. Unless the centrality of the Scriptures is established, minds are immediately opened to the problems associated with ideas of mystical, 'inner light' experiences and revelations. The written Word stands over against such extravagances. This is so important that we shall spend some time in tomorrow's Note discussing it further.

51) 8:6-13

There is a sense in which to say that the wisdom of heaven is disclosed and available to us in the Scriptures makes it sound much less exciting and thrilling and mysterious than to say that it comes by direct revelation. But it is a fleshly concern that over-emphasises the latter at the expense of the former. This is borne out by what Peter says in his second epistle (2 Pet 1:19 ff), where he expressly indicates that the revelation of God in the Scriptures is not only more important but also more sure than any special visionary experience. Nothing could establish more emphatically the primacy of the written Word as the source of divine revelation. Once again, therefore, we come back to what we have had to say repeatedly over the years, that there is no substitute, in Christian life, for a thorough grounding in the Holy Scriptures. When we are prepared for the discipline involved in true Bible study, wrestling with the divine truth, feeding upon it, we will surely come to wisdom, and wisdom will be found in us. This is the pattern, and this is the prescription unfolded in these verses, and its value (11) is absolutely superlative; there is nothing that can be compared to it. If a man is wise, he will be prudent and he will have discretion (12), for wisdom produces these things, and goes hand in hand with them. Above all, he will be godly: what is repugnant to godliness (13) is also repugnant to wisdom; wisdom and godliness like and dislike the same things.

52) 8:14-21

These verses continue to underline the value of wisdom, setting it in a larger context. When one thinks of it in relation to spiritual life, one sees what an incomparable possession it is - to be an understanding Christian (14), understanding the things of God, understanding men, understanding oneself - all that we sum up on the phrase 'He is a very wise man'. But wisdom is more than a grace to adorn the individual life: it is the principle and power at work in the affairs of men, in the ordering of government, and the foundation of all just rule. This does not of course mean that all kings are just or wise, but rather that all wisdom in rulers comes from God (15). Men in authority need wisdom in order to exercise justice. The implication in 17 is that the search for wisdom can never begin too soon. The question arises in 18 ff whether the reference is to material benefits or immaterial. Perhaps the writer has both in mind, but certainly the latter seem to predominate as the thought of the verses develop. The 'way of righteousness' in 20 surely indicates that the 'fruit' referred to in 19 is spiritual, not material. This is a timely word for our own materialistic age, and one that is underlined even in our own experience in the growing realisation in industry that things like 'job-satisfaction' are more important than the size of the pay-packet taken home at the end of the week. It will be a great day for modern society when men in general realise that life does not consist of the abundance of the things one possesses, but in the more intangible, qualitative factors - peace, contentment, fulfilment - and that these have a spiritual, not material basis and origin.

53) 8:22-31

In these verses we have one of the most remarkable passages in the whole of the Old Testament. It is easy to see the underlying unity between these words and those of Paul in Colossians and John in the Prologue to his gospel. The thought is majestic and mysterious throughout, and it flashes and gleams with glory as we are taken back to the beginning of things, before creation. The word 'possessed' in 22 is perhaps best taken to have the same kind of meaning as the word 'begotten' in John 1:14 and 3:16, referring, in Christ, not to His creation, for He is not a created being, but to his eternal existence with the Father - what the theologians speak of as the eternal generation of the Son, proceeding from the Father, yet co-eternal with the Father. The phrases 'I was there' (27) and 'as one brought up with him' (30) underline this mystery in a wonderfully graphic way. The eternal co-existence of wisdom and God, and the equality between them make the identification between wisdom and Christ inevitable. The AV reading in 30, 'I was daily his delight' suggests a reference to the communion that exists between the Father and the Son before all worlds, that ineffable relationship that is given expression in the story of the Transfiguration, when the glory of the Son blazed forth on Mount Hermon. It was the passion of our Lord's life to do His Father's will, and in fellowship and communion with the Father that passion and love suddenly blazed out and He became, as it were, 'incandescent' with the glory of it. It is something of this ineffable relationship that is spoken of in this remarkable phrase in 30. There is another point in this connection, in the further reference to 'delight' in 31, and we shall look at it in tomorrow's Note.

54) 8:22-31

The juxtaposition of ideas in the reference to 'delight' (3) and 'delights' (31) is very suggestive in relation to the New Testament revelation of Christ, Who is set forth as the Mediator between God and man. Here is a picture, by implication, of His mediatorial work, relating in His God-manhood both to the holy God and to sinful man, standing in between them, so making peace. It gives a very graphic insight into the mystery of the Atonement to see on the one hand the reality and joy of His fellowship with the Father and His love for Him, and on the other His pleasure in those created in His image, His desire for them even in their atonement for their sin. This twofold delight in the Father and in His sinful creation - is what brought Him down to express the Father's love to the sons of men, It is something passing wonderful that He should condescend to take pleasure in His people (cf Ps 149:4) - this is the mystery of grace, and what our minds can hardly comprehend our hearts may surely know, and will know, when we respond to the invitation of this heavenly wisdom to embrace it and make it our own.

55) 8:32- 36

The concluding verses of the chapter drive home the appeal of wisdom by reminding us of the ultimate issues that are involved; life (35) or death (36). The appeal is based on wisdom's love for men and delight in them. We are urged not to refuse it, and we should note particularly what is being said here. It is not that somehow men may inadvertently miss wisdom, for it is not ignorance that is involved, but a question of moral refusal. Wisdom is accessible, nay more, it is on the initiative to bless men, and therefore abundantly at hand for all who will have it. The real question is therefore one of acceptance or refusal. It is a culpable matter, in the moral realm, and its issues are fraught with eternal consequences. One commentator suggests that the metaphor in 34, in the words 'watching daily at my gates', is that of an ardent scholar waiting till the doors of the school are opened and he can begin his studies. 'When one thinks of the school of Christ, the idea of one who is so keen on learning that he is at the door before opening-time is a graphic and impressive one. If this is the spirit that animates our learning, we will not be long in learning wisdom. Let us learn from this that when we find Christ truly, He will make us wise. It is in the measure in which we have found Christ that we become wise; and if we are not very wise yet, it is more of the real Christ that we need. For he who sits in the school of Christ surely learns wisdom, all-round, balanced wisdom; he learns to use his mind, he learns to think, he learns prudence and discretion as well as knowledge. When we receive the truth as it is in Jesus, this is what we receive.

56) 9:1-6

This chapter continues the contrast between wisdom and folly. This is the theme that has occupied the writer from the beginning of the book up to this point, and we now have the climax of the appeal that the father makes to his son. The contrast is between 1-6 and 13-18: two rival feats are portrayed, wisdom's and folly's. There is a sense in which we need to read into this chapter the insights of the preceding ones, for what is said here really depends on them, For example what we have seen up to this point is that the appeal of wisdom has been to the mind and the reason, whereas that of folly has been to the emotions and the senses. This is important here, for observe how similar the appeal is in each case, in 4 and 16. Both are saying the same thing. Here is the subtlety of the situation. The idea is two possible roads to the same goal: which is a man to take? Will he not need to have recognised the voices by this time, to know the difference between the two? But this is possible only on the basis of what has already been said in previous chapters. The offer that wisdom makes is - life (6): the offer of folly - enjoyment (17). This is in line with the general emphasis of the last eight chapters. We should note also that the metaphor in 1 about building is taken up by Jesus in Matt 7, in the parable of the wise and foolish builders. In that parable, the outward appearance of the finished products must have been very similar indeed; the difference lay in the foundations, and it was only when the rains came and the winds blew that the fundamental difference was revealed. So it is here. It would be hard to discern any difference between 4 and 16. It is the 'afterwards' in each case that reveals the gulf fixed between the two.

57) 9:1-6

Let us pursue the building metaphor a little further, Foundation –laying is never so exciting as the actual putting up of the building; and the building of character is very mundane compared with the excitement of emotional and highly-charged experience. This is the real point at issue: some actually prefer the latter to the former, and their preference is based on the appeal to the feelings and the instincts rather than to mind or reason, But wisdom's appeal is ever to the reason, as we see again in 1 ff. Observe what is implied in these verses: what wisdom builds is spacious and enduring. The picture is of a Greek or oriental portico, with strength, massiveness and elegance the keynotes. There is nothing meretricious about this building, it is something that will last, without the risk of a 'vacation order being passed upon it for faulty workmanship.

We should also note the echoes of this passage in our Lord's parable of the marriage of the king's son in Matt 22:1 ff. The picture there, as here, is of the kingdom of God as an open house, with the offer of a great feast to all who are invited, the guests deficiency, as Kidner graphically puts it, their only qualification (4). No one is sure of the meaning of the 'seven pillars', and much ingenuity has been expended on necessarily inconclusive conjecture. What about Knowledge, Discretion, Sound Wisdom, Prudence, Counsel, Instruction, Understanding prominent and familiar words in Proverbs - as a suggestion? With regard to the choice between wisdom and folly, compare Moses in Hebrews 11: 23 ff, who refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt. How to make this estimation? If a man does not see this, nothing can be done to persuade him. But one of the ways it can be seen is to learn the lessons of the previous chapters. This leads us naturally to the message in 7-12, to which we next turn.

58) 9:7-42

The relation of these verses to those before and after them is not immediately clear, but if we bear in mind the alternative choices described in 1-6 and 13-18 we see that a distinction is being drawn between the scorner who refuses instruction and betakes himself to folly, and the teachable man, who is amenable to wisdom, Wisdom and folly are seen to be the end-products of the two opposite attitudes, not random accidents but predictable outcomes of a certain way of life. As Kidner puts it, men are not 'saved or lost merely through an isolated, impulsive decision. The choice is seen ripening into character and so into destiny'.

Sow a thought, reap an act,
Sow an act, reap a habit,
Sow a habit, reap a character,
Sow a character, reap a destiny,

Our Lord's words in Man 7:6 seem to echo what is said in 7, 8. The implication seems to be that wisdom recognises that it will not get very far with the scorner, and that the thing to do with him at the moment is to leave him alone, Perhaps he will come to a better frame, of mind later, but in the meantime he will only mock the holy message of God, and we must not cheapen it by offering it to him: 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs'. What is said in 12 must not be misunderstood: it is true that no man lives unto himself, and that his wisdom will rub off on others and be a blessing and benefit to them. But what is being emphasised here is the question of individual responsibility. As Kidner says, 'Such statements are not meant to deny that people benefit or suffer from each others' characters, but to emphasise that the ultimate gainer or loser is the man himself. Your character is the one thing you cannot borrow, lend or escape, for it is you.'

59) 9:13-18

Folly is here personified as the harlot of chapter 7. It is interesting that this want of understanding is imputed to the woman as well as to her hapless victims. This is worth remembering. For all its cunning and subtlety, there is a basic stupidity about evil for which wisdom can prove an effectual corrective and protection. We should note particularly the nature of the appeal in 17: it is to experience, to sensation, to feeling and instinct. Reason can say No to this; reason can say, 'This is not true; but alas, reason's voice is often unheeded. The particular emphasis of the words of this verse seem to imply that sinful ways are much more attractive in the imagination than they turn out to be in reality. Is not this something that we repeatedly prove in experience? Eve must have taken the forbidden fruit a dozen times in her imagination before she stretched out her hand for it. It is the imagination that proves so enticing. Is not this the deceitfulness of sin, beguiling people with a lie, glamorising it and them, and duping them into its clutches, when they find that the realisation is never so satisfying as the imagination of it promised. So they indulge in it again and again, and are never satisfied. Well might Hebrews 11:25 speak of the pleasures of sin for a season: the season is very short indeed, so short sometimes as to be momentary and fleeting; then it is gone forever, leaving nothing but dreary frustration and distemper, and gnawing depths of despair. There are some hells that begin before death (18).

60) 10:1

We come with this chapter to the Proverbs proper those of Solomon, which comprise the main heart of the book, 10:1-22: 16, and 25:1-29: 27, A word of recapitulation on the theme of the first nine chapters may therefore be helpful at this point. We quoted Kidner as saying 'We do not come to Solomon's proverbs till 10:1, for the very good reason that the reader needs preparation if he is to use them fruitfully'. The introduction makes it clear that the book is a course of education in the life of wisdom, with the 'text' in 1:7 going to the heart of the matter, and the nine chapters following being an exposition of it in a series of exhortations from a father to his son 'which illustrate the fateful choice the pupil must make between wisdom and folly'. Then in 10:1 ff., we are able to see in each proverb a miniature and particular outworking of the wisdom and folly that have been unfolded in the first nine chapters. We should note that, throughout, the assumption is made that the young should be prepared to listen to the counsel of the old. There is no problem of the 'generation gap' here, no thought of their saying, 'You do not understand'. Also, one thing that has stood out very clearly is the constant emphasis on wisdom being identified with the use of the mind, the reason and the understanding, rather than with the feelings, instincts and emotions. This is something that we shall continue to see in the proverbs that follow.

61) 10:1-3

In the contrast between wisdom and folly that is presented in this chapter it is impressive to see the down-to-earth, ethical content of true spiritual life. This is a notable emphasis, and something desperately needing to be remembered today. One sees the connection between what is said in 1 and much of the earlier teaching. In Wednesday's Note, we quoted Kidner on 9:12, 'Your character is the one thing you cannot borrow, lend or escape, for it is you'. But here in 1 we have the other side of the coin: for no one lives unto himself. Our wisdom, or folly, will inevitably affect others, especially those nearest to us in natural relationships. It is the parents who stand to suffer most acutely and distressingly through the folly of their son. One commentator suggests that each proverb almost can be illustrated from other parts of Scripture from character studies, and in 1 he instances Solomon, and the wisdom that his father David coveted for him (cf 1 Chron. 22:11-13a, 2 Chron 1:7-12). The folly in 1b is surely exemplified in the story of Esau (Gen 26:34, 35, 27:46). Also, there may be more than the recognised Hebrew parallelism in the two halves of the verse, for is it not the mother who is likely to feel most agonisingly and deeply the foolishness of her son? Both wisdom and foolishness bring their own reward (2, 3). The judgment of God in both its aspects, that of recompense and that of punishment, operates not only at the end of history, but also at all points in its course. As Paul puts it in Romans 1, God's wrath 'is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men', and in 1 Tim 4:8, 'godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come'.

62) 10:4-7

We should note the juxtaposition between righteousness in 2 and 3 and hard work in 4 and 5. The true spiritual life of righteousness, in other words, has a down-to-earth ethical content. Nowhere in Scripture is indolence ever countenanced in the life of the believer. The righteousness which is of God by faith is one that produces an integrity of life in a man, and one of the things this means is that a man who names the name of Christ will not at any time be a slacker at his work. The saying in 5a is paralleled in modern terms by the idea of 'making hay while the sun shines'. Industriousness is the keynote. Where laziness is present, faith is in that measure unreal. These words have much to say to our present industrial difficulties, slackness, shoddy workmanship, deteriorating standards, idleness in working time - these are the known problems in so many sectors; and while bigger and bigger pay packets are the order of the day, such attitudes bring impoverishment to the nation, in reputation abroad as well as in balance of payments deficits. The real problem that faces Britain is not the colour of its politics; the issues are moral, and will be met and solved only by a new spirit and a will to work. The blessings of sheer integrity (6) would do more to bring a spirit of contentment and wellbeing than any number of material advances - and these are the enduring realities (7): men of such character who have left their mark on the nation's life in the past are still remembered and venerated -like Shaftesbury or Wilberforce. It is the evil and unprincipled whose names disappear and are forgotten.

63) 10:8-13

The wise in heart can be spoken to (8) and are willing to learn and receive correction. For the Christian, this is the way in which his love for Christ is manifested. By contrast, the prating fool, too wise in his own conceit to think he needs correction, has to learn the hard way, often by being found out (9b RSV) in the most humiliating kind of way. Again in 8 and 9 we see the correlation between wisdom and ethical integrity, The picture is a very fine one, and it's inevitable outcome is seen in the fruitfulness that such a life shows forth (11). The use of the metaphor of speech here ('mouth') is meant to indicate that the integrity is communicable and communicated to others: influence is exercised by such men (cf Isa 50:4), and it is the moral quality, not the giftedness of life, that matters and counts. This thought is continued in 13, where the idea is that 'if your mind is enlightened, wisdom will overflow into your words, and so into other lives' (Kidner). The meaning of the phrase 'love covereth' (12b) is seen from its converse in 12b, 'hatred stirreth'. A man with hate in his heart will stir up trouble for others, whereas a man who loves will want to hush up the sins of others, so as not to let them be gossiped about by others. Moffatt has a wonderful translation of 1 Cor 13:6: 'Love is never glad when others go wrong'. This is the spirit that breathes in 12. May it ever be ours: Alexander Whyte of Free St George's had a motto on his study wall with the words, 'Is it true? Is it kind to repeat it? Is it necessary to repeat it?' Is there not a good case for saying that, the more we repeat, the less we love? It is better to be a terminal than a channel, for some of the items of information that are passed on to us about others. When we do pass them on (in confidence, of course!), we tend to call it sharing; but the world's name for it is gossip.

64) 10:14-17

'Lay up' in 14 means, according to Kidner 'keep in store for the right occasion', and the reference is to discretion. The RSV renders 14b more clearly: 'the babbling of a fool brings ruin near'. We could link this with what was said in yesterday's Note. in relation to gossiping - what harm it can do, and what dangerous situations it can create: But it has a more general reference also: we have all known occasions in company when something ill-advised and indiscreet has been blurted out which has caused endless embarrassment and even hurt. A discreet person would have had more sense than say such a thing. We must not read more into 15 than is intended: all that is being emphasised is that realism, not romanticism, must be the criterion in matters of money. Nor must we read too much into the contrast between rich and poor, as if being rich were equated with righteousness and being poor with sin. There is no thought in 15 and 16 of the problems of grinding poverty, the poverty that is not a man's fault. Rather, what underlies the teaching here is the general contrast that these chapters deal with between prudence and improvidence. The idea is that the man who is prudent is a man who is likely to get on in life, and the man who is improvident won't. It is all a question of what and how much a man is prepared to discipline in his life. A man uses his possessions according to his character: if he is a disciplined character, his labour will be put to good use, and there will be fruit from it; if he is not, his money will go down the drain in smoking, drinking and gambling. The money that some men and their wives have spent on smoking cigarettes for the past twenty five years would have been enough to have bought them a very substantial house and property. This is the kind of idea these verses have in mind.

65) 10:18:21

A great deal is said in Proverbs about words, and this chapter is no exception (see also 31,32). If a man has hatred smouldering in his heart, his words cannot be trusted, and at any opportune moment it will be seen just how little they are to be trusted. It is the same with slanderers and talebearers (for the first, see 2 Sam 3:27, and for the second, Jer 37:11-15). The thought continues in 19. Words should be used sparingly and wisely. We are enjoined to be 'slow to speak' in James 1:19. 'Refraineth' indicates the need to put a rein on our tongues. Jesus said, 'By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned' (Matt 12:37). If there are too many of them, some of them are sure to be ill advised, and likely to cause trouble. Besides, if we habitually talk too much, we will get a reputation for it, and certain conclusions will be drawn concerning us, and a certain reserve will be seen to develop in people's attitudes towards us. We should notice the association of tongue and heart in 20: they are used almost synonymously, for the good reason that what our heart feels our tongue will sooner or later say. The two metaphors in 20 and 21 bear the same message: When a wise and discreet man speaks, his words have a sterling quality (20), bearing a hallmark of integrity, as silver bears its own hallmark, and they are means of sustenance to those who hear them (21). It is what a man is that sets the value of what he says.

66) 10:22-25

The series of contrasts continues in these verses, and it is instructive to follow the thread of each in turn: blessing, wisdom, fulfilment, enduring integrity on the one hand, and sorrow, mischief, fear and insecurity on the other. The truth is that both the wise and the foolish are caught up in a process that carries them forward with its own momentum. Paul echoes this in Romans 6:19-23 in the alternatives 'iniquity unto iniquity' and 'righteousness unto holiness'. It is so very true that each of us makes his own future, for weal or woe. The 'it' in 22 is emphatic, underlining the exclusive prerogative of the blessing of God: it is only that blessing that can enrich, and when it does, it is unalloyed bounty that it bestows. The meaning of 23 can be brought out by the observation that what people think funny is often a good index of their character. Sometimes a man will play a practical joke that is in poor taste and will laugh uproariously. This tells a great deal about him. Then we think of another, and say of him, 'He would never have done a thing like that, even as a joke'. Again, as in 22, the 'it' in 24 is emphatic. There is a parallelism between 'feat' and 'desire', and paradoxically both lead to the same in the end, for what the wicked dreads is confrontation with God, and this, for the righteous, is the ultimate beatitude: Kidner quotes C S. Lewis's well known words in this connection, 'In the end, that Face which is the delight or terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised'. Character and integrity are the only things that will survive that awesome confrontation (25).

67) 10:26-32

The sluggard (26) gets very little shrift in the book of Proverbs (cf 6-9, 10, 12:27, 13:4, 15:19, 18:9, 19:24, 21:25, 26, 22:13, 26:13, 15, 16). Here, his 'nuisance-value' is graphically indicated, particularly to those who have the misfortune to employ him. The evocative metaphors both suggest the lingering unpleasantness and inconvenience he causes as something it is impossible to ignore. The contrasts in 27-30, both in the interim and in the ultimate, are clear, plain and unequivocal. What is said in 27 expresses a medical as well as a spiritual reality: evil living is bad for the constitution, as we are having proved to us more and more by medical science: 'For both worlds the lawless are not gainers, but losers, by their wilful rejection of the Word of life; while 'godliness is profitable in all things, both in the life that now is, and in that which is to come'. A host of testimony-bearers on each side come up to confirm the solemn truths here enumerated so pithily. Cain and Abel; Noah and the antediluvian world; Abraham and his idolatrous kin; Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his accusers; all in the first book of the Bible, with a vast number throughout its remaining books, witness the great contrast which the testimony of experience in all ages has but confirmed' (Ironsides). The chapter ends with two final observations about words and the fruit of the lips. The difference between the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish, comes out in the way they speak. Speech reveals the state of the heart. Wisdom produces seemliness (see Col 4:5, 6), while its opposite gives a perverse twist to life. Such are the alternatives that the father of the earlier chapters sets before his son, and bids him take stock.

68) 11:1-2

The down-to-earth, ethical content of true spiritual life underlined in the previous chapter is continued in the emphasis of chapter 11. This is not the only place in Scripture where dishonesty and falsity in business is condemned (cf Deut 25:13-15, Lev 19:36, Prov 20• 10, 23). Two things should be noted here- one is that the condemnation is made on the highest grounds, for God's sake. Dishonesty is first of all an offence and an affront to God, as well as being bad for society. Absolute integrity is what is pleasing to Him: Here, as elsewhere, we see how central and basic is the idea of the fear of the Lord where He is revered, His standards will become ours, The other consideration is that the idea of the false balance can be applied in other than literal ways. The whole question of giving value for money, for example, in one's daily work is a case in point: wasting time at work, shoddy workmanship, questionable business methods - these are all variations of the 'false balance', and must be shunned. 'Pride' in 2 (a word ' used of the arrogance of those who must have everything their own way, and will not be 'kicked around'" - Kidner) is essentially anti-God: this is why it always comes to grief. It contains the seeds of its own fall within itself, and shame (or disgrace) is inevitably the result. For God resisteth the proud, 'Lowly' is the word that we have in the famous statement in Micah 6:8: 'What doth the Lord require of thee but....to walk humbly with their God'. This is wisdom indeed!

69) 11:3-9

The theme running through these verses is righteousness in relation to problems of guidance and the pitfalls in life that await the unwary, Two very important statements occur in 3 and 5 which have a great deal to teach us on the whole vexed question of divine guidance, What they proclaim unequivocally is that when there is a real purpose in a man to walk in the truth, the Spirit of God can be counted upon for guidance and direction, God guides us through the integrity He has wrought in us by His grace, If He is having His way in our lives, we will think right thoughts, we will have right perception and right discernment It is only when integrity of heart is assailed by other, ulterior motives that complications arise. We all know from our own experience that wishful thinking has a great deal to answer for in this matter, If we want desperately that God's will should lie in a particular direction, the temptation is very great to convince ourselves that His will does lie there. This is our blind spot: others may see clearly that we are on the wrong track, but we become oblivious to this in the end, because we have so convinced ourselves - because we have wanted to convince ourselves. 'Wrong' guidance, then, or continued problems in guidance, raise the question of one's integrity.

The emphasis on guidance by integrity and righteousness underlines once again that God's ideal is that guidance be from within rather than from without, that they who are joined to the Lord should be one spirit, and therefore should think His thoughts. This is the meaning of integrity: when a man is right with God, he will be right; and when he is right, he will be led in the right way by that rightness. It is what a man is that determines how and where he goes.

70) 11:3-9

We may think of 'wrath' in 4 either in the ultimate sense, in terms of the judgment day - where the meaning of the verse is obvious - or in terms of any crisis-time of trouble, such as sorrow, misfortune, heartbreak. At such times, it is character that counts, not social status. Integrity is like a rock in time of trial - it will bear a man through any tragedy, and at the last through death. It is wrought by God in a renewed heart. The meaning in 6 is that evil has always within itself the seeds of its own destruction - this should be a substantial comfort to us as we look across the world and see all its convulsions. This is one reason why God often seems to let things go on far longer than we feel He ought: He is giving evil its head in order that it may finally go too far and destroy itself. The RSV translation of 8b, 'the wicked gets into it instead' gives a clearer meaning of the verse, similar to the emphasis in Ps 7:15. In 9 the reference is to the harm that malicious, destructive talk can do. The antidote is knowledge - that is, it always helps to make the truth of a situation known, to get the record straight. When this is done, in the interests of truth, it is astonishing just how much subversive talk by godless people is set at nought. This is a Christian duty, and no one should shirk its fulfilment through natural diffidence or timidity. There is a time to speak as well as a time to be silent.

71) 11:10-11

These verses speak of the immense social asset that collective righteousness can be in a community. Public life is always the better of a thriving spiritual community in its midst. Even if a city does not have much time for what the spiritual community believes in and holds dear, it will benefit by it. This is supported by our Lord's own words 'Ye are the salt of the earth'. The Church has a twofold function - to be salt and light: light in terms of active evangelism, winning men to Christ, salt in terms of restraining corruption. This is something we tend to forget; we should be far more positive in our thinking about these things than we sometimes are. The simple truth is that the very existence of a thriving spiritual witness, apart altogether from the impact that that witness may make on individuals, drawing them into the kingdom of God, can have transforming effects on the body politic. It is known, as a matter of history, that times of spiritual awakening have brought immense social benefits even on a national scale. The revival movement of the mid-nineteenth century brought in its train many of the most important and far-reaching philanthropic and social agencies for the betterment of human conditions that have enriched British life. The civic mottoes of Glasgow and Edinburgh 'Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the Word' and 'Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it' - bear witness to the truth of these verses: where there is a living ministry of the Word in any city, it is going to preserve that city from the worse forms of corruption, aside from any direct influence that Christian testimony and preaching may have upon individuals. We must never underestimate this: it is part of our function as the Church. It does not mean getting involved in city politics as a Church (that is the duty of individual Christians). It is when the Church is intent on being the Church, not a political agency, with gospel-involvement, not political involvement its aim, that it exercises a leavening power in society.

72) 11:12-14

The RSV turns 1.2a around to read 'He who belittles his neighbours lacks sense', This rendering has the advantage of indicating that the 'despising' (AV) is vocal, and serves to show the connection with the thought of the next verse. Wisdom dictates an attitude of reticence and silence in the kind of situation envisaged here, 'Keeping things hidden' (13, RSV) bears a similar emphasis to 'love covereth all sins' (10:12), and this should bring a note of caution into our thinking about the place of confession in the experience of the Church. It is true that 'confession is good for the soul', and that it is biblically enjoined; but it is possible to be preoccupied with, and to glory in, confession for its own sake, and this is unhealthy and wrong. There are lots of things trailed out into the open that had no business to be thus trailed out; in our kind of society, the less people know about some things the better for everybody concerned. Sometimes a desire for such 'openness' simply panders to carnal instinct, and must be resisted, in the spirit of 13b. There is an interesting and significant emphasis in 14, which might raise problems for some who say, 'Ought we not to go to God, not to others, for our guidance and counsel (in terms of 3:5)? Yes, surely; but what we must recognise is that God may choose to give us His guidance through human counsellors. This is the point that is being made here (and repeated in 1.5:22, 20:18 and 24:0). Refusal to listen to the counsel of others in favour of 'listening to God' sometimes indicates a determination to depend on one's own judgment. 'Even the wisest and godliest are often given to blunders and errors of discernment; for infallibility is a dream indulged in concerning one man alone. To weigh a matter in the presence of God ; to invite the counsel of those whose experience and spirituality evidence ability to try the things that differ, is the course of wisdom' (Ironsides)

73) 11:15-19

For the thought in 15, see Note on 6:1-5, Tues. Sept. 18th, where it is discussed fully. A contrast is probably intended between 'gracious' and 'strong' in 16, as in the following verses; 'strong' must therefore have an element of 'ruthlessness' in it (RSV has 'violent'). It is a question of contrasting aims in life, and whether character or cash is the more important for us. One commentator says. 'Nothing is so truly lovely and admirable as a gracious, conciliatory spirit, whether in the home, the fellowship, or in our dealings with the world'. One thinks of the lovely story of Abigail in 1 Sam 25. Her graciousness combined wisdom, tact, prudence and forbearance - a host of admirable characteristics, much to be desired in all human relationships. Being merciful (17) is good for us. Evil attitudes are bad for the constitution for the simple reason that our constitution was not designed for them. Think what a discontented spirit within does to the face: The RSV speaks of the wicked's wages in 18a. A man whose eye is always on the main chance may seem to get on in life, but his advancement is only seeming; he will surely come to grief (cf Psalm 37.1, 2, 9, 35, 36; 73:3ff). Sure and lasting reward lies with righteousness. Note that it is not merely 'one who is righteous', but one who 'soweth righteousness'. This is an activity, not a state, with a dynamic in it. As the Apostle John says. 'He that doeth righteousness is righteous' (1 John 3:7).

74) 11:20-23

The meaning of 'froward' can be well conveyed by the phrase we sometimes use in exasperation, 'He is an impossible person' - awkward, difficult, contrary, It is straightforward, uncomplicated people who are God's delight. In 21, the phrase 'hand join in hand' refers to the wicked teaming up together to defeat the justice of the Almighty, 'shaking hands on the deal' - but all to no avail, for God says, 'No matter, they will not go unpunished'. In 22, what is stressed in the utter incongruity of beauty allied to want of discretion. Kidner has an amusing comment on this verse: 'The proverb puts it more forcibly than we might. Where we (to whom the outward is the impressive part) would have spoken of the lady as a little disappointing, Scripture sees her as a monstrosity'. The theme in 23 is the outcome of what we set our hearts on. Where your treasure is, says Jesus, there will your heart be also. If a man is righteous, there are only some things that he will be desiring; if he is wicked, his desires go in a certain direction too. Either way, he will have his reward.

75) 11: 24-28

The writer now turns to a consideration of the generous spirit, and touches on one of the most basic and profound paradoxes of Christian experience in 24, echoing Jesus' own words, 'He that loseth his life for My sake, the same shall find it' (cf also 2 Cor 9:6-10 for a further statement of the principle) It is a simple fact of experience in Christian life that no man is ever the loser for having given generously in the work and service of God. God is no man's debtor, and He has promised 'Them that honour Me I will honour' (1 Sam 2:30). It is the man who withholds what he should be giving (24b, RSV) that suffers impoverishment. Liberality (25) is what we were made for, and we become our real and true selves when we are generous and open-hearted. We are already rich, when we have a liberal spirit, apart from any reward God may bestow upon us. The thought in 26 is of deliberate and calculated withholding of grain in order to force up its price, and so make unscrupulous profit from the sufferings of men: if this justifiably brings upon such the cursings of men, what shall he said of those who withhold the bread of life from a needy world dying for want of it? The thought in 27 is that of the backlash of evil, The mischief-maker, who rejoices in mischief and desires the undoing of his neighbour, will himself be undone, Evil is always self-destructive, and has the principle of retribution built into its very nature, The true riches (28) are always moral, not material. It is the righteous, not the affluent, who is truly wealthy. To bank on material riches for anything is to build on a very precarious foundation.

76) 11:29-31

The thought in 29 is akin to that in Hosea 8:7, 'They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind'. Once again, the idea of the inevitability of retribution is indicated, A man who brings sorrow into his home and family by the way he lives will surely pay for it, because the universe is built on moral lines. God will see to it that he does not do so with impunity. The RSV rendering of 30b reads completely differently from the AV - 'lawlessness takes away lives', and this makes the contrast with the first part of the verse, which emphasises that a righteous man has a life-giving influence, Such a contrast is in line with the other verses in the passage. All the same, however, the AV version is a legitimate translation, and bears an important truth, The wise can win others to wisdom because there is a life-giving influence at work Spurgeon once preached a famous sermon on this text emphasising the different ways in which the word 'winneth' is used in everyday life. We speak of a man °winning a fortune' in the business world, and think of all the dedication and self-discipline involved in so doing; we speak of 'winning a battle', and think of the hard training and discipline needed to make an army competent on the battlefield, We speak of 'winning a bride', and think of the single-mindedness of the lover as he dreams of his beloved. All this requires to be read into the winning of souls - and not without the same rigorous self-discipline, the same dedication, the same single mindedness and self-giving, will souls be won for the kingdom. If we give to this noble task the kind of wholehearted commitment that the business man, the soldier, the lover give to theirs, we shall have the success in it that they have. Souls will be won.

77) 12:1-4

Again, in 1, the emphasis is on teachability. The RSV has 'discipline' in place of the AV's 'instruction', rightly indicating that in Proverbs 'instruction' and 'wisdom' often contain this thought. It is, moreover, an ongoing work: we are never in the position of having 'arrived'. Indeed, one of the marks of wisdom is one's willingness - and the consciousness of the need to accept the continuing disciplines of the Word. The word 'brutish' suggests an insensitiveness to this need. The contrast in 2 and 3 is between the life that is rooted and grounded in God, and the rootlessness and shiftlessness of life apart from Him. There is another suggestion here (as we have seen in previous chapters) of the inherent stability of evil, and the self-destructive quality in it. This is the kind of contrast illustrated in Psalm 1 (which see), The introduction of the 'virtuous woman' in 4 is perhaps significant in this context, as if to suggest the enormous influence for good that a true woman can have on the shiftlessness of a weak man's life. 'Virtuous' means not only chaste, but contains the idea of strength and all other good and noble qualities, The use of the word 'crown' is also significant, for in Scripture it is not ordinarily used in a decorative sense, but as the symbol of authority, What is being said is not so much that a good woman is an ornament to her husband, adorning his home and his life - although this is true - but that she adds authority to his life by helping and enabling him to be all that he can be and ought to be as a man. Conversely there is a significance in the use of the word 'rottenness' that is more than merely metaphorical. What happens when bones rot? For one thing, a man cannot stand upright, and what is meant here is that a woman that causes shame robs a man of his ability to function as a man. That is enough to be pondering for one day!

78) 12:5-8

There is a progression in the thought of these verses: thoughts - actions - outcome and reward. This holds good in both directions, goodward and evilward. We may learn from this something of the power and dynamic of right - and wrong - thinking. Right thoughts will lead to right words, and will have a right outcome. This is why it is so important to guard the thoughts in spiritual life. If we think something, sooner or later, if that thought is left unchecked, it will out, in words and indeed. The idea in 6 seems to be that of an ambush, and what is in mind is the subtlety of an underhand, surprise attack, when it is little looked for or expected. In contrast, however, the words of the upright, having their origin in right thinking, are a manifest evidence of his sincerity and therefore a protection against slander, so far as he himself is concerned - for when he is thought well of, who will think ill of him? - and a liberating influence in the lives of others. In 3 'wisdom' is rendered 'good sense' in the RSV, and the meaning is that it is self-commendatory and self-evidently good, commanding respect. Apart from its value and reward in the spiritual life, it is something in itself good and worthy. The converse of this, 'of a perverse heart' has been rendered by one commentator as 'wrong-headed', a translation that says a great deal and covers much ground: Perhaps we need the AV's reminder that there is something twisted and bent in such an attitude. We must not discount the element of the wilful in the human heart, even when its waywardness is most in evidence. This is what makes men culpable.

79) 12:9

The RSV rendering of this verse reads differently from the AV, and should be followed here: 'Better is a man of humble standing who works for himself, than one who plays the great man but lacks bread.' Read thus, the verse is a tilt at a false, hypocritical snobbery, the pretense of being other than one is. This is a basically dishonest attitude, revealing a discontent with oneself which, if true and real, should be dealt with in another way than this. The real answer is not to pretend we are better than we are, or other than we are, but to establish a true dignity of personality. It is so wonderfully refreshing to meet real people; but people who put on airs are very see-through-able. They themselves do not realise this, of course, but everyone else does. And they are both laughable, and a source of great irritation. To give oneself airs - this is the kind of metaphor that suggests blowing air into a balloon. And it needs only one pinprick to burst a balloon: So uncertain and precarious is the position of those who 'play the great man'. It is so much better - and safer - to be real, even if 'being real' means being quite small and of humble station, than to be an inflated, but unreal creature. A real person may be quite ordinary (how unwilling we are to be just chat:), but at least he is solid reality and cannot be made smaller than he is 'even when people try to pull him down a peg or two) but a man with exaggerated ideas of his own importance or standing in society is living in a dream world of unreality from which he is liable to be rudely awakened at any moment.

80) 12:10-16

A series of contrasts between the righteous and the wicked follows in these verses. We could put 10 this way: a right man will never be cruel to an animal, and when people are cruel to animals, they are not right people. Where there is a basic reverence for life, this dictates a certain attitude which extends to brutish and even inanimate creation. 'Vain persons' in 11 is rendered 'worthless pursuits' in RSV, The proverb is a significant one, and is of wide application, not merely on the agricultural and industrial level, but also on cultural levels. One thinks of the paralysing effect of 'boxed' entertainment - music at the turn of a switch which has so largely killed the desire for making music by learning to play an instrument oneself, and the tyranny of the TV which has changed the reading habits of an entire generation and bids fair to destroy the ability of people to think independently and conduct intelligent conversation. The 'do-it-yourself' principle is given an absolute precedence in this realm: The contrast in 12, according to Kidner, seems to be between the delusive attractions of evil methods and the quiet rewards of goodness. 13 and 14 go back once more to the theme of words and deeds, It is impressive to see how frequently this crops up in Scripture (cf. Matt 12:36, 37). One thinks of Paul's solemn warning in Gal 6:7, 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap' - this is true in both directions, for good or evil. A wise man, says 15, RSV, listens to advice (see 12:1). Note the paradox here: one would think that if a man is wise, he does not need to listen to advice; but in fact the wise man is usually quite open-minded, and prepared to concede the possibility that he might be wrong. He recognised that he is but a man, and not God. In 16 the RSV should be followed. The wisdom that makes a man open-minded also enables him to ignore an insult, knowing that ultimately it cannot hurt him.

81) 12:17-22

More about words: The second clause in 17 makes the subject matter of the verse clear: it is the truthful man who can be relied on to give honest evidence. In 18, 'speaketh' has the force of 'blurted out' (cf Ps 106:33), and the reference is to the immense harm that such rashness of speech can do. The man who boasts of always 'speaking his mind' can be an incalculable hazard in this connection. He is dangerous, and has some very urgent lessons to learn in life. The RSV rendering of the second part of the verse, 'the tongue of the wise brings healing', is graphic and helpful, and Moffatt's translation is even more so, 'there is healing power in thoughtful words'. Fortunate the company that has in its midst someone who can thus bring healing into a situation ravaged by a thoughtless tongue; In 19, the idea of judgment is in view the lying tongue will be the object of Divine dealing. But alas, the harm a lying tongue can do can last for years. It is because of its potential for evil that God deals with it. A New Testament commentary on 20b is found in the beatitude, 'Blessed are the peacemakers'. To promote the good of others out of goodness of heart will always bring blessing to those who do so. 21 should be taken in the sense of Romans 8:28, 'all things work together for good to those that love God', It does not mean that no distress can ever come upon the righteous, but rather that the over-ruling providence of God turns all that comes to good for the believer.

82) 12:23-28

In 23, it is the quality of discretion that is in view. Some people appear to find it impossible to keep quiet about the things they hear -- and this, alas, applies all too often when confidences are given them by those who have a right to expect them to be honoured and kept. It is very sad when a Christian cannot be trusted not to pass on to others what he has been told as confidential. The message in 24 is pertinent and to the point. Someone has called this 'the gospel of work'. It comes as a salutary reminder to all those who hanker after short cuts to success, in whatever realm. You have to work hard to get to the top, in any field, and this applies just as much in spiritual life. It is astonishing the number of people who want to start at the top: Not so, says the Word. The bottom is the place for starting - and it is the only safe place. 'Heaviness' in 25 is rendered 'anxiety' in RSV, and this is probably what is in view rather than depression. The antidote? Something we can all provide, 'a good word'. Here particularly we can see the power of words. There is a ministry of mutual encouragement always at hand in such situations, and we must never be slow to exercise it. It can, on occasion, save a man from despair. The translation of 26a is very problematic, and the AV is unlikely to be right. The literal rendering is 'The righteous make; investigation of his neighbour' - e. he does not rush into a friendship impetuously, and does not surrender his moral judgment to anyone (so Kidner). The reference, then, is to the exercise of the spirit of discernment. What is said in 26b makes it clear that this is very necessary in the realm of friendship. There is always the danger of being led astray. 'The meaning of 27 is that the slothful man does not finish what he starts. He begins with all good intentions, it may be, but he lacks application, and 'sticking-power', and gives up long before the end. We all know life this: they turn their hand to this, that and the other, but rarely finish anything. Link this with the thought in 24. It is hard work that gets one there and wins the rich dividends.

83) 13:1-3

Once again the emphasis is on the power of words. Wise words from a father, I have power to shape and direct a young man's life and make him wise - this is the recurring theme of the earlier chapters of Proverbs, as we have seen. It is the scorner who is indifferent and impervious to instruction. The main thrust in 2 and 3 is what we say and how we say it. As Kidner puts it, 'words pass; their fruit remains'. This applies in both directions, good and evil. Good words pass, once they are spoken, but they leave something rich and immensely fruitful behind them. One thinks of the enormous impact that even a chance word spoken by someone in the Spirit can have on a man, changing the whole course of his life, and, in contrast, what an idle, evil, untrue word can do to a whole structure of friendship, in terms of misunderstanding and hurt. The reference in 3 is to rashness of speech, ill-advised and unwise - words spoken in anger that had far better been left unsaid, or words spoken in an expansiveness of spirit with others which betray confidences and disclose private matters that ought never to have reached the ears of others. It is not for nothing that the Apostle James speaks as he does in his epistle (3:2 ff) about the tongue. The perfect man is the one who has his tongue in subjection. And it is perhaps significant that he gathers up his teaching in terms of the contrast between heavenly wisdom and that which is earthly, sensual, devilish. His mind is clearly informed by the teaching of Proverbs.

84) **13:4-11**

Although the proverbs in these verses are disconnected and stand by themselves for the most part, it is possible to see an underlying connection in the progress of thought. It is interesting, for example, to see the association of ideas between the sluggard in 4 and the diligent man in 11. The general contrast between the righteous and the wicked has many related ideas, and we are invited to see the link between laziness, wickedness, poverty and shame on the one hand, and righteousness, diligence and prosperity on the other. Kidner has a valuable word-study on 'the sluggard', who appears frequently in Proverbs: "The sluggard is a figure of tragi-comedy, with his sheer animal laziness (26:14), his preposterous excuses (26:13, 22:13) and his final helplessness. He will not begin things. When we ask him (6:9, 10). 'How long...?' 'When...?', we are being too definite for him. He doesn't know. All he knows is his delicious drowsiness; all he asks is a little respite: 'a little...a little...a little'. He does not commit himself to a refusal, but deceives himself by the smallness of his surrenders. So, by inches and minutes, his opportunity slips away. He will not finish things. The rare effort of beginning has been too much; the impulse dies. So his quarry goes bad on him (12:27) and his meal goes cold on him (19:24, 26:15). He will not face things. He comes to believe his own excuses (22:13), and to rationalise his laziness; for he is 'wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason' (26:16). Because he makes a habit of the soft choice (20:4), his character suffers as much as his business, so that he is implied in 15:19 to be fundamentally dishonest, Consequently he is restless (13:4, 21:25, 26) with unsatisfied desire; helpless in face of the tangle of his affairs, which are like a 'hedge of thorns' (15:19); and useless - expensively (18:9) and exasperatingly (10:26) - to any who must employ him." Do we see a little - and perhaps more than a little - of ourselves in this devastating exposure?

85) 13:4-11

The thought in 6 righteousness as a guard has already been discussed in the Notes on 11:3-9. The familiar theme of riches and poverty is dealt with in 7 and 8. The RSV renders 7 quite differently from the AV. If we follow the former, the thought is very similar to that in 12:9, 10 (see Note), and speaks of the kind of person who gives himself airs and plays the great man. This is a fool's game, silly and laughable; and we should laugh at it in amusement rather than boil over in annoyance and resentment. When we do the latter, it may be an indication that something of the same spirit lurks in our own hearts. If the AV is followed, however, the meaning will be that the man who goes all out for riches may in fact be impoverishing himself in the things that matter, whereas the man who impoverishes himself for a worthy cause immeasurably enriches himself (cf 2 Cor 6:10), Moffatt's rendering of 8 reads, 'A rich man may buy off his life: a poor man can ignore the robber's threat' - that is, if you are poor, no one is going to go to the trouble of kidnapping you and holding you to ransom, it would be a waste of time (for a similar thought see Eccles 6:12), The compensation of poverty can be considerable! The contrast of light and darkness in 9 reminds us of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matt 25, In 10, the emphasis is on 'only', and the meaning is that pride is an ingredient in every continuing quarrel. The contrast to 'well-advised' will therefore be to 'stand on one's dignity'. And how protracted a quarrel becomes when this is done! The thought in 11 has startling relevance for our modern, materialistic society, Wealth easily gotten - and it is perhaps significant that gambling wins are the only things exempt from income tax in our economy! - dwindles with the same ease with which it comes. The principle of hard work commended here is a much more stable basis on which to build national prosperity.

86) 13:12-18

The sentiment expressed in 12 is of wide application, whether in normal human relationships or in the spiritual sense, But the 'sickness' referred to need not mean black discouragement or despair (though it carries an ache with it) if we recognise that in God's dealings with us there is an appointed time for fulfilment, His delays are not denials: the husbandman is to have long patience as he waits for the precious fruit of the earth, and these who 'wait for the consolation of Israel' will at the last enter into peace and joy (Luke 2:25,29). The 'word' in 13 may refer in general to 'instruction' in the sense in which it has been used throughout the book, but by implication this means also the word of God for, of course, it is the divine counsel that this father is passing on to his son. The 'reward' of fearing the Word, and reverencing it, far from being a cramping effect on experience, proves to be a fountain of life (14), Refreshment - and safe guidance too (14b) It is the other road that is the dangerous one. This is underlined in 15b, whether we take the A V rendering or the RSV, which reads 'the way of the faithless is their ruin'. One can never be sure when that particular path will crumble underfoot, For the thought in 16 see 12:23 (and Note), and 15:2. If a man is prudent, everything he does will show the mark of prudence; if not, his foolishness will be seen every day of the week. In 17 the RSV rendering should be followed, 'a bad messenger plunges men into trouble', The application of this to ordinary daily life is obvious, but it has a particularly pointed thrust when applied to messengers of the Word, If a man preaches a false or defective word he will lead many astray; even his doubts will communicate themselves to others. A faithful ambassador, on the other hand, brings healing. Given someone who is faithful to God's Word, there will be a health-giving virtue around. For the thought in 18, see 1:20-33 and Notes!

87) 13:19-25

The thought in 19 is difficult and the meaning uncertain. It is best to take the two parts of the verse as presenting a contrast. If this is so, the 'desire' is that of the righteous, and its fulfilment is sweet to the soul because it is legitimate and worthy. This is borne out in 25. However little the portion of the righteous may be, it will satisfy him, for he will be content and have a contented spirit. But the unrighteous will never be satisfied, not only because he is essentially a discontented person (and there is nothing in the world so all-consuming as discontent), but also because he has wrong desires. And it is of the very nature of a wrong desire that it cannot be satisfied. The whole universe could be poured into its gullet, and still the craving would be there. This is where the power of a good example can be so saving (20): to see desires controlled in contentment must surely do something to those who are in the grip of lawless cravings, and point to the more excellent way. The theme in 21 and 22 is retribution. Retributive justice is insisted upon in Proverbs, even in this life, let alone the life to come. It is good that we should remember this in a day when the whole concept of retribution in punishment is regarded as derogatory and un-Christian. This is a thoroughly biblical emphasis, and it is surely proved in experience: both good and evil have an 'entail' at work in them. A good man leaves a rich legacy to his posterity in terms of character and influence and inspiration; the evil that men do lives after them also, and can often be a curse to their families. The blessing - and the curse - will pass on from generation to generation. We shall look at 23 and 24 in tomorrow's Note.

88) 13:19-25

The RSV reads 23 differently from the AV, and gives the meaning that there is food in plenty in the lands of the poor, but is often swept away through injustice. This makes good enough sense, One thinks for example of lands like India, with its frequent and repeated famines, where conditions have been on occasion made tragically worse by the injustice of evil men who have hoarded stocks of grain in order to sell at exorbitant prices. We could also put this on a more general basis, and remind ourselves that the food yield of the world should be sufficient to feed all its inhabitants; yet vast stocks of grain and other foodstuffs can be dumped and destroyed - for political, economic or ether reasons - rather than make them available for the needs of deprived peoples. But the AV also makes good sense as it stands, giving a contrast between the ground of the poor which is well and industriously tilled, and that of the wealthy which is often neglected and squandered. The general message, in this sense, would be that of what we do with what we have, and if this be applied to spiritual life and resources, the challenge is a very forthright one, There are many spiritually under-privileged in the Church who make the most of what they have, while others who have the finest of the wheat lightly esteem it. One thinks of how preciousy Christians in Czechoslovakia prize their times of fellowship and the ministry of the Word - no clock-watching there, or ten-minute sermons; - whereas in places where there is an open book and freedom to worship people will idle away their spiritual heritage. It is sometimes only when God removes a believer from a fellowship where he receives a steady diet of the Word and plants him in the midst of a waste and barren place that he learns to appreciate what he has lost.

89) 13:19-25

There was not time in yesterday's Note to deal with 24, a verse too important to pass over without some comment. We must not make the mistake of thinking that this is merely an Old Testament emphasis, for it is taken up in detail in Hebrews 12:5-11. It is certainly true that imperfect motives must be guarded against, and also undue severity, as Paul makes plain in Ephes 6:4, where there seems to have been some tendency towards these errors, but the obligation remains, We have already seen, in 4:3, 4,11, the place of tenderness, constructiveness and example in the relationship between parents and children, and this should make it clear that there is no essential compatibility between these qualities and the firmness of discipline advocated here. A recent medical report indicated that the psychological disturbances in young people caused by over harsh and repressive treatment by parents was much more amenable to successful treatment than the psychological disturbance caused by lack of discipline: This should be reassuring and heartening to those who take the teaching of Scripture seriously, 'Betimes' means not 'at times' or 'from time to time' but 'in time'. Literally translated, the phrase reads 'he seeks him early with discipline'. This can mean both the application of discipline from the early days of the child's life and the instant checking of the child's misbehaviour as opposed to the punishment only at the end of a long series of warnings and repeated verbal scoldings. 'It is not love, but the lack of it, that leave a child to himself; to develop, unchecked tendencies and propensities which shall result in future sorrow' (Ironsides).

90) 14:1-3

The RSV is scarcely warranted in omitting the word 'woman' in 1, as it certainly occurs in the text; by doing so, the thrust of the verse is missed. Literally it reads 'wisdom of women'. Kidner suggests 'Womanly wisdom buildeth...'. What is referred to is the quality on which a true home depends. Once again we see the remarkably prominent emphasis on the place given to the woman in establishing, not to say stabilising, a home. There is certainly no thought in Proverbs of the suppression of women kind, or of their being given an inferior place. In 2, it is life and conduct that prove whether one is really walking before God or not - not what a man says about his spiritual experience so much as what his spiritual experience says of him. The meaning of 3 is uncertain. Does it mean that the foolish talk of the fool will bring a rod upon his back for his pride? Or does it mean that the words of a fool are like the shoot springing up out of a seemingly dead tree-trunk, thereby giving indication of a hidden root - i.e. the fool's words give his real nature and character away? Both are true, but here perhaps the first alternative may be more likely, not only in the contrast afforded by 3b, but also in conjunction with 15:1. Once again, then, in these verses, wisdom and folly are set over against one another, with the logical and inevitable issue and outcome of each made utterly clear, to encourage us in a right choice between the two, and to render us without excuse if we fail to make it.

91) **14:4**

Here again the RSV translates differently from the AV, giving the meaning that where there is no work there is no produce. But the AV as it stands yields a clear and challenging meaning, which is that it is sometimes possible to pay too high a price for cleanliness and orderliness. A farmer can keep his cattle shed spotless and immaculate only by dispensing with his cattle - which is a high price to pay for cleanliness, if the cattle happen to be important for the farm. Doubtless he would prefer an untidy crib and have the oxen working for him. The mess - and the smell - are things to be put up with on a farm. This is a principle of wide application. On the domestic level, where there are children, there are two possible attitudes that parents can adopt towards the shambles of the playroom floor: they can insist that the room must be kept spick and span, with everything just so - if they are house-proud this is what they will feel like, If they aim at this, there will be a price to be paid in terms of what they will do to their children in terms of stifling their natural development. On the other hand, they can allow them freedom to make a mess and in so doing encourage development both physically and mentally. This is not a plea for indiscipline, or slovenliness, but as Kidner puts it, for the readiness to accept upheaval, and a mess to clear up, as the price of growth. Orderliness, as he says, can reach the point of sterility. What is true on the domestic level is just as true in spiritual life. If we think of the Church of God as a 'workshop' rather than as a 'showpiece', then orderliness could be on occasion a stultifying, not to say paralysing, factor in the spiritual situation. We must not expect spotless 'floors' where things are being 'made'!

92) 14:5-8

The thought in 5 is echoed again in 25 (cf also 12:17, 19:5, 9, 21:28, 25:18). In the spiritual sense, we may link it with 2 Cor. 4:2, where Paul speaks of 'handling the word of God deceitfully'. The scorner in 6 is not simply one lacking in seriousness; he is a rebel against God and has refused His ways. It is this refusal that blinds a man's mind and therefore closes it to true wisdom. The statement in 6b needs to be understood alight. Knowledge is not easy in the sense of there being nothing to it, but rather easy of access and readily available to those who seek it truly. A sincere desire to know the truth is the best preparation for the attainment of knowledge and wisdom, We should compare the thought in 7 with Jesus' words in Matt 7:6, 'Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine', There comes a time when one refuses to discuss spiritual things any further with someone who is obviously truculent and insincere, The man who always ready for an argument, but who clearly is not interested in being brought to conviction, ought not, for the good of his soul, to be argued with. Perhaps the point of what is said in 8 is that the true believer needs to be prudent and discerning enough to know when the time to withdraw from such a one has come and to act accordingly (cf 2 Thess 3:6 for a similar thought and injunction).

93) 14:9-11

Kidner thinks that the AV rendering of 9 is more likely than the RSV, and that it 'contrasts the unconcern of fools for the damage they do, God-ward and manward, with the care of the upright to preserve goodwill'. The thought expressed in the moving words of 10 bears witness to the truth that there are some experiences in life that we must bear and endure on our own; they cannot be endured for us, nor can they, in the ultimate sense, be shared. Perhaps a close friend might in measure be able to enter into the burden, but certainly not any casual acquaintance (taking this as the force of 'a stranger' in Job), It is true that God has given us the gift of fellowship to palliate the aches and distresses of life, and one of the sweetest and most comforting things in human sorrow is to know the fellowship of kindred spirits - and that can be imparted to us with, a look as well as by much being said. Yet, in the last analysis, there is that inner sanctum where on the human level we bear our sorrow alone. It is only the One that sticketh closer than a brother who can fully enter in and give the comfort that can most fully assuage human grief. There is an obvious and deliberate contrast intended in 11 between 'house' and 'tabernacle'. The house of the wicked, which seems (to him) so enduring and lasting, bears witness to something which is extremely common and a source of constant amazement to spiritual minds, namely that the worldling lives as if he were going to live in this world for ever, He does not take death into account at all; it is for him the one forbidden subject, But there is nothing so sure in life as death. And, paradoxically, the temporary dwelling place of the believer proves to be more permanent than the lasting house (cf the parable of the wise and foolish builders in Matt 7:24-29).

94) **14:12-14**

The commentators point out that 'right' here refers to a seeming short cut to success taken by those who are impatient of advice, hard work, or moral scruples. One thinks of different examples: buy a premium bond and you may have twenty-five thousand pounds by the end of the week - the short cut to financial success; covet the special blessing and take a short cut to instant spiritual maturity, by-passing the inevitable discipline that alone can produce it. Sadly enough, this is a truth that is often only learned the hard way. In 13, the word 'that' should be omitted. The thought expressed is that of the poignancy of human experience, with its inevitable and inescapable mixture of tragedy and gaiety. It is certainly true, as the hymn says, that 'all our joys are touched with pain, that shadows touch our brightest hours, that thorns remain'. The proverb does not tell us, as the New Testament does, that the grace of the gospel enables us not only to live with this, but to triumph over it. In 14, the 'backslider in heart' is translated in the RSV as 'a perverse man'. The verse speaks of two different kinds of loneliness: the perverse man, who turns away from God, is left in an isolation of his own making, and that can be at times unendurable. As Ernest Hemingway makes one of his characters say, 'Having done such a thing, there is a loneliness which cannot be borne'. In contrast, however, there is a loneliness in which one finds contentment. Paul says in Phil 4.11, 'I have learned in whatsoever state I am to be content'. He was independent of circumstances, because his heart was feeding at the hidden source of all contentment, He had Christ, and that to him was life, It is the worldling who needs things; he lives his life coveting them, whether business or domestic; he grasps them, believing they are the answer to the craving of his heart. But the good man, even though he may have nothing, is content, because he knows that true life is independent of things, consisting not of the abundance of what he may have, but of a proper attitude to life, which when a man has, he is 'satisfied from himself', What does our life consist of?

95) 14:15-19

Three different kinds of foolishness are indicated in 15-17 – gullibility (15), over-confident rashness (16), and irascibility (17). The gullible man is taken in by anybody; he has no discernment, and is unable to distinguish between what is gold and what merely glitters. This is not only a sad, but also a risky, state to be in, and can spell real trouble in life. The over-confident is well exemplified in the picture we have in the gospels of Simon Peter, rash, impulsive and not knowing his own heart and his own weakness, and inevitably coming to grief. The weakness of the third man in 17 is that temper flares suddenly and easily and sometimes unpredictably - surely an ominous sign, and a mark of foolishness. The end result of wisdom and folly is described in 18 and 19. 18a does not mean that the folly of the simple is something that is handed down from generation to generation, but simply that he heaps up folly for himself by his actions and attitude, 19 seems to point forward to an ultimate vindication of the good, with the evil having to admit and concede that the good are right and righteous, and that they are vindicated before God. This is the ultimate assurance and peace of the righteous: the universe is built on moral principles, and therefore moral categories must in the end prevail. But even in the interim the sheer worth of goodness elicits respect, however reluctant, from those who are exposed to it, even when they have little intention of embracing it. In spite of themselves, they recognise it for what it is.

96) 14:20-22

We may be tempted to think that the statement in 20 is harsh and unfeeling, but in fact the writer is simply making a statement of fact; he is looking at life and seeing how things actually are, He is not at this point making any comment - that comes in 21. We can hardly deny the truth of what he says, at all events: the world is often a very pitiless place, 'The moral judgment that is passed on this in 21 is very blunt and unequivocal, and the writer calls an ugly thing by its proper name. What is said in 20 may be an accurate description of how it is in the world today, but it is certainly not something that can be tolerated by Christian people, nor is it an attitude permissible for the spiritual man. Contempt of one's fellows because of their poverty is a sin against God. There may be an association of ideas between what is said in 22a and what precedes it: to harbour inward contempt may well lead ultimately to its being expressed in outward attitude. The contrast in the two halves of 22 presents an interesting picture - on the one hand people getting together scheming mischief and evil, on the other people devising good. As a matter of fact., however, we do not usually speak of people 'plotting' or 'devising' good, and this may be the measure of how unorganised we are. It is surely a Christian duty to sit down sometimes and think out ways of doing good and showing love and kindness. We need not fear that this might seem to be forced and artificial: it is because we have made love so much a matter of casual impulse rather than a basic principle guiding our living that there is so little of it in the world and in the Church. Do we not say, when reproached for lack of care or concern, 'I never thought of doing that'? Exactly. We never thought. But we should have thought. There is a place for thinking of it'. This is the point here: we are to devise good. A little thoughtfulness, a little benevolent 'scheming', might make all the difference in the world to many situations.

97) 14:23-27

The sentiment expressed in 23 is very relevant for today when one of the great needs of society is to recover the idea of the worth of labour, to get away from thinking of work simply as a means to an end, a means of making money. A man who has no other interest in his job save in what it brings him in his pay-packet is a man who is basically obscene, in the true sense of that word. The biblical doctrine of work is that it is honourable; it is instituted by God in the order of creation in such a way that true fulfilment can be found in work honourably and well done. It does something to us in terms of producing integrity in us, and this is true with even the most humdrum of jobs. There is a similar kind of thought in 24, where the point is not so much that wise people are generally those who get on best in the world in a material sense - for this is not always true • as that the wise are always rich, however little they may have. The word 'crown' as we have seen in an earlier Note, is not used in Scripture ornamentally, but always as a sign of authority and power. Wisdom does something to people: it bestows authority on them; and this is their true wealth. Kidner has an interesting and valuable comment on 25, "The special Christian overtones of the first line in AV do not really belong to it: the context (unlike that of 11:30) is the law court, and 'souls' are 'people' or 'lives'". The meaning, then, is that a true witness, by bearing true testimony in court, is the means of justice being done. The theme in 26 and 27 is godliness ('the fear of the Lord'). It is on the one hand a source of assurance, safety and protection (26); on the other a source of vitality (21). 'His children' in 26b refer to the family of the godly man, and this contains a truly wonderful promise that godliness of life will extend its influence to future generations. Why then should we be so fearful for our children?

98) 14:28-31

We have in 28 a word of considerable import for those who would bear rule over us. Unless a sovereign or sovereign's minister can command the respect of the people, unless they can honour his integrity and therefore own his authority downfall is inevitable 'surely a timely reminder that character and integrity, not cleverness and astuteness in political manoeuvre,, are the qualities that matter' The emphasis in 29 and 30 is on peace and tranquility. 'Live peaceably', says the writer, 'for it is wisdom to do so' (29). He that is peaceable in the ordinary circumstances of life who is not easily provoked (17a) has found the secret of wisdom, Not only so: a sound (tranquil, RSV) heart is good for the health This is not quite the same thing as having an easy going nature: a tranquil mind can be very angry at times with injustice and wrong. whereas an easy-going nature does not seem to make much distinction between good and evil There are some important New Testament references that underline the thought in 31, as for example James 2:5 where the apostle speaks of the danger and the scandal of respect of persons and 1 John 3:17 and Matt 25:34ff From these passages we see that there can be both conscious and unconscious oppression of the poor: it can be done by deliberate discrimination and it can be done by inadvertence, and the one is as bad as the other. He who is kind to the poor, however, honours God. In a general sense, of course it is obvious that to show mercy honours God, but it is true in a particular sense also, because it reflects God's image in the world, it shows the world what God is like, It is a 'placarding' of God in the world Would that we His people, believed this more!

99) 14:32-35

The 'his' in 'his death' in 32 refers not to the death of the wicked but to that of the righteous himself, and the meaning is that the righteous has hope even when he dies. Not even death disturbs his hope; on the contrary, his hope and faith carry him through it. A man who has understanding and wisdom (33) will not blurt out all sorts of things willy-nilly - as for example in the matter of confidences committed to him. It is the fool who cannot keep his mouth shut. In this sense one cannot be a fool in secret; one's foolishness will out, and often, alas, in a most mischievous way. What is said in 34 is, in the last analysis, the ultimate test of governments and systems. The real issue is not whether a government can improve the unemployment problem or the balance of payments, but whether it stands for righteousness, whether in its legislation it is being informed and directed by the laws of God or merely by prudential considerations. Integrity is the real issue, and should be the only true criterion. There is a real moral in 35 (following the RSV rendering), and it is this: If you want to get on in life (is there a link here with 34?) you have to live worthily, because unworthy living always gets the rap sooner or later. As Kidner puts it, "The saying is a bracing reminder not to blame luck or favouritism but one's own shortcomings, for any lack of recognition. Moffatt gives the sense well: 'The king favours an able minister; his anger is for the incompetent' " There is a tremendous realism in this: we are all tempted from time to time to evade the real issue in a situation, But Proverbs challenges us to take a long hard look at ourselves and come to terms with ourselves. This is often the first step - and indeed the only way - to real recovery.

100) 15:1-3

One commentator refers us to Judges 8:1-3 for a good example of how a soft answer takes the heat out of a critical situation. It is only too true that a harsh word (lb, RSV) can exacerbate an already tense and potentially explosive time of crisis - and, alas, if the truth be told, such a word is often deliberately spoken in the full knowledge that it will make things worse. A right attitude here requires us to have our personal feelings under strict control and in complete subjection: otherwise, we will allow the situation to dictate what our feelings will be, instead of the word and will of God. In 2, it is not so much a question of saying little or much, but of speaking advisedly or unadvisedly. There is responsible utterance. One is reminded of Eccles. 3:7, 'there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak', The wise man knows how to speak with profit, and when. There is an interesting reference in 2 Chron 16:9 which echoes the statement in 3, and gives an illustration of what it means. The Lord's eyes behold the evil and the good in every situation, and He acts accordingly: if people have done evilly and foolishly, He adopts a certain attitude, and if they have done wisely and well, in a spirit of reliance on Him, He adopts a certain attitude towards them. This is a word of immense encouragement, if we are in the will of God, because it tells us that God sees us, sees our situation, sees our problem and our difficulty, and His heart is toward us. We recall how Hagar in the wilderness came to this amazed consciousness 'Thou God seest me', These words are an immense comfort or an enormous terror, depending on whether we are in His will or out of it.

101) 15:4-7

More about words: For 'wholesome' in 4, the RSV has 'gentle', and the NEB 'soothing'. The root idea in the word is 'healing'. A healing tongue is the tongue of a peacemaker (cf Matt 5:9), and it's opposite (4b) need not be involved in active malice or ill-doing. Foolish speaking that is merely ill-advised or thoughtless can be sufficient to break the morale of someone who has, it may be, been battling for long enough with adverse circumstances, and the thoughtless prattle is the final straw that breaks the camel's back, and the hard-pressed saint goes down into bleak and black discouragement. In 5 we have the 'generation-gap' syndrome once again: 'My father is a 'square', he does not understand'. This is something the Scriptures will not countenance. The way to learn is to listen. The reference in 6 is not necessarily to material wealth, although it is included, but rather moral and spiritual riches. If so, then association with such a house will bring much enrichment. Surely this is something we prove in our experience as Christians. We all know homes in which it is a pleasure and joy to share fellowship, and in which we find blessing and enrichment because it is a right home and the people who live there are right people. There is a dynamic in 'rightness'. Conversely, in a house where the people are not right, infections of various sorts become sadly contagious. In this connection, we should note the association of 'heart' with 'lips' in 7. As a man thinks in his heart, so is he, and if the heart is not right, the influence of even ordinary talk will be decisive. Nothing a man does or says is really right, when he himself is wrong.

102) 15:8-9

We can bring out the meaning of these verses as follows: the theme is 'Sunday' and 'Monday' religion. In 8a and 9a we see the wicked going to Church on Sunday and to work on Monday. In both alike, he is an abomination to the Lord, because he is not right in His sight. The real and true sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, and a broken and a con--trite heart; and until a man comes there, nothing he gives to God, nothing he does on Sunday or any other day of the week is acceptable to Him. This is the note we have seen so often in our studies in the Old Testament prophets: what point, indeed, in multitudes of sacrifices, if men's hearts were far away from God? in contrast to this divine disgust, however, there is the delight that He takes in the upright (8b, 9b), on Sunday and Monday alike. There are two points to be underlined here: one is the integral link between the 'Sunday' prayer and the, 'Monday' walk of the true believer. When the spiritual life is right in inward relationship with God, the daily walk will always be worthy, commending itself both to Him and to men by its consistency. The other point is the happiness and delight that the worship of right people brings to the heart of God. God loves Sunday too - this is the meaning - and when the hearts of those who love Him go out in glad worship and adoration and praise, it brings an immense joy and happiness to His heart (cf Psalm 149:4). We should think of this far oftener than we do. It is true that the Sabbath was made for man, but it is still His day; and the spontaneous outpouring of worship and praise from redeemed hearts 'makes' His day for Him. Think on these things!

103) 15:10-15

The commentators seem to see a progression in 10 from 'forsaking the way' to 'hating reproof', and from 'grievous' to 'shall die', the implication being that the first state will harden into the second. Good and evil are both dynamic, they do not ever standstill, but advance inexorably along their own path. Hebrews 4:13 echoes faithfully the thought in 11, and provides a solemn backcloth against which to re-read 1-9. The NEB translates 'scorner' as 'conceited man' and this makes good sense, for such an one cannot stand being reproofed, he has such a sublime conceit of himself. It would never enter his heart that he could be criticised. This is a sad and dangerous state to be in! In 13 we have a venture in 'spiritual cosmetics'. Most people look better, and many are transformed, when they smile. If we are rejoicing in Christ with the merriness of heaven, it should be showing in our faces, which are a pretty good reflection of the real thoughts of our hearts. This does not mean that we will have a fatuous grin on our faces all the time, but there will be something about the way we look that will convey the deep springs of joy within us. This is further underlined in 15: our prevailing attitude of heart affects not only our faces and our personality, but also our whole experience, and makes life a continual feast. This may seem extreme, even idealistic, but we can hardly doubt that it is the emphasis we find in the New Testament (cf Romans 8:28, Phil 4:11 ff). It is not so much that life has a drab and dreary look about it, as that it is our attitude to it that makes it seem so. A man in Christ sees life with new eyes; and what to other men are misfortunes or even disasters, he sees as opportunities and challenges. There are two ways of looking at any situation: if we are gloomy of heart, we will be filled with foreboding; but if our heart is resilient, we shall look at it straight in the eye, accept it as from God, and make capital out of it. The choice is ours.

104) 15:16-19

We missed 14 in yesterday's Note. The force of the contrast it makes lies in the verbs 'seeketh' and 'feedeth'. There is a purposefulness about the first whereas the second suggests random nibbling (cf 2 Tim 3:7). There is no doubt about the sense of direction that the possession of wisdom and understanding gives to a man, compared with the aimless and feckless course leading nowhere - of the foolish. On 16 and 17, one commentator gives the following: "The one who has found his joy in the Lord can well understand the dear old saint who spread upon his humble board a bit of bread, an onion, and a glass of water, and then joyfully thanked God for 'all this and Jesus': Better, far better, is it to have little on earth, and to know Him and abide in His fear, than to have great treasures and varied luxuries, coupled with trouble and hatred." The point in 18, Kidner maintains, is that quarrels depend on people far more than on subject matter, and he quotes a description of the 'peacemakers' in Christ's Beatitude as those 'who carry about with them an atmosphere in which quarrels die a natural death', The RSV renders 19 as 'The way of the sluggard is overgrown with thorns', a reminder that the lazy way often proves more difficult and troublesome than is realised. The contrast between the sluggard and the righteous seems to suggest that laziness has traces of unrighteousness and even dishonesty in it. It is a form of self-indulgence that makes trustworthiness a very debatable point.

105) 15:20-24

For the thought in 20, see 10:1. No man lives to himself. His wisdom or folly will inevitably affect others, especially those that are nearest to him. The second part of the verse goes further than 10:1: here the foolishness has an element of moral turpitude and heartlessness in it. The foolish son despises his mother, sitting loosely to the grief and the hurt that his attitude causes her. The thought seems to continue in 21, where the 'playboy' attitude to life is compared with the straight course of the purposeful man. There is something important here: the trouble is that when this attitude settles and becomes hardened in a young life, so that he grows up to think that the world owes him a living, he will eventually become a psychological misfit in the world, and become incapable of responsible behaviour. Hence the phenomenon of the man who, though intellectually and physically mature, is an emotional juvenile, a psychological cripple. This is a good backcloth against which to see the force of 22: we need to get all the advice we can, so as to learn about our weakness and waywardness, recognise the danger spots, and take remedial action. In this connection, we must surely applaud and appreciate the sentiment expressed in 23: many a useless and wasted life might have been rescued and rehabilitated by a word spoken at the right time, bringing a home truth which, though unpalatable and blunt, would have jolted a man into a new frame of mind. And when we think of the issues of life in terms of the upward and downward in 24, what responsibility this places on the wise to speak the right word at the right time;

106) 15:25-29

The message of 25 is that the Lord is on the side of all who are materially oppressed. He promises not merely to be a husband to the widow, but also to be her judge, and in this context this is even more important, because sometimes a husband cannot protect a wife's interests as he would want to, but a judge is in an official position. He is an administrator of the law, and it is this that God undertakes to do; He will see to it that justice is done. The contrast between thoughts and words in 26 is interesting. Before the thoughts and intents of wicked men's hearts ever come to fruition in words or deeds, God sees them and hates them. On the other hand the words of the pure are pleasing to Him because He sees behind them to the intents of the hearts from which they spring, and is well pleased with the purity that is their source. In 27 the RSV significantly inserts the word 'unjust' before 'gain', and this serves to underline the thrust of the phrase, although the implication of 'greedy' is sufficient in itself to make clear what is meant. To be greedy is already to have gone too far. The keynote in the verse is that integrity in material things is absolutely essential. The thought in 28 is similar to that in 2. Righteousness and wisdom belong together, foolishness and evil also: to speak without thinking, as the foolish so often do, is next door to speaking evil things. 'Heareth' in 29 should be understood to include 'answereth', because He who hears prayer is the One who answers it. His ear is ever open to the cry of His people.

107) 15:30-33

Kidner suggests that 'the light of the eyes' (30) may refer to the radiant face of a friend, and that the verse therefore speaks of the heartwarming effect that persons and facts, respectively, can bring. Translated into spiritual terms and applied to the gospel, the words light up with a profound meaning. The good news of the gospel certainly brings a light to the eyes, and in turn the radiance in the eyes of those whose hearts God has touched with salvation communicates itself to those who see it. The testimony of transformed lives is always a strong and compelling advocacy of the gospel. In 31-33 we have once again the oft-repeated emphasis on teachability. To have an ear and a heart open to reproof and wholesome admonition is itself a mark of maturity as well as being an attitude that leads to deeper maturity. In contrast, a man (like Nabal the churl, 1 Sam 25:17) who cannot be spoken to is his own worst enemy (32) and can do himself untold harm. To be too proud to receive correction, too self-conceited to think instruction necessary, too arrogantly complacent to admit the possibility of error, is to be enclosed in a prison of one's own making - and withal puts an impossible strain upon life, for our frail and fallible mortality protests against such unnatural claims made for it, knowing that they do not fit the facts of life. To abide in the fear of the Lord is to own that it is the part of wisdom to acknowledge mistakes and faults, and so to receive admonition as coming from Him.

108) 16:1-9

There is more obvious cohesion in this chapter, at least in the first half of it, than we have hitherto seen, with 1-9 belonging together, also 10-15 and 27-30. In each of our verses today, apart from 8, the name of the Lord is mentioned. This is in one sense unusual since many of the proverbs deal with the 'horizontal' relationships, between man and man. Here, the emphasis generally is on the sovereignty of God and on His watch and surveillance upon the whole of life. In 1, the RSV rendering is clearer and truer, setting the two parts of the verse in contrast to one another. The meaning is that, for all man's freedom to plan, it is God's will nevertheless that is furthered in the final issue. As we say, Man proposes, but God disposes. An illustration of this may be seen in the story of Joseph and his brethren in Genesis. The latter planned and schemed to Joseph's hurt, but 'God meant it unto good'. One sees in the story the marvellous interaction of human planning and activity with the divine sovereignty. This is not something we can ever fully understand: one has simply to hold the two poles of the paradox in tension. In 2, the truth that is stressed is that all human actions, and indeed all human thoughts, come up for divine appraisal (of 2 Cor 5:9, 10, 1 Cor. 4:3-5). 'Commit' in 3 literally means to 'roll upon', and is one of the words translated in the Old Testament as 'trust' and emphasises the act and attitude of faith as being to roll one's burden off one's shoulders on to the shoulders of Another. Kidner finely comments, 'Our activities and plans will be no less our own for being His: only less burdensome, and better made.'

109) 16:1-9

The RSV correctly renders 4 as 'The Lord has made everything for its purpose', and the meaning is that in the economy of God nothing is wasted: even evil is put to use and made to contribute to God's glory. This never means that God is its author, merely that it is under His control. In 5 we have one of the familiar notes of Proverbs. Though the wicked join forces, as it were in a league against God, they shall assuredly have their desert. For the phrase 'hand join in hand' see Note on 11:21, Friday, 26th October, 1973. The parallelism in 6 seems to indicate that 'mercy and truth' have reference to man rather than to God. This does not in any wise contradict the biblical doctrines of grace, nor is it true to say that man's loyalty or faithfulness can have any part to play in atonement for sin. Rather, the reference is to the practical response of faith to God's mercy and truth. Taken like this we can surely realise how qualities like 'loyalty and faithfulness' (RSV) can do a very great deal in human relationships, in terms of bringing a new spirit into a situation. The wonderfully hopeful statement in 7 does not contradict the New Testament teaching about the inevitability of tribulation and persecution as the lot of the believer; rather, it bears witness to the gracious over- ruling of God in specific situations, bringing peace again and again to the experience of His people. He is Victor, and He gives that victory to those that trust in Him. For a notable illustration of this truth, see 2 Cor 1:8-10. The thought in 8 echoes that in 15:16, 17 (see Note), and 9 is a companion verse to 1. One recalls the saying in Jeremiah 10:23, 'The way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps'. As Ironside puts it, 'People frequently think they are having their own way, when in reality the Lord is leading them with "bit and bridle" through strange paths, for their discipline and blessing at last (cf Ruth 1:21).'

110) 16:10-15

These verses have reference to kingship and power, and throughout the idea of authority bestowed by God upon rulers is in view. We begin with an ideal for rulers (10). The RSV gives 'Inspired decisions are on the lips of a king', and this underlines the point that is being made, namely that in his official capacity the king speaks as one ordained by God (cf Romans 13:1). In this respect, his word is to be regarded as having authority. But, by implication, the words must also mean that this is what God requires him to be: in giving sentence, his mouth must not be unfaithful. Since the king is the ultimate court of appeal, he must see to it that that ultimate court of appeal is a just one, not unjust. People must be sure that when they get through to the top, they will find an impartial judgment (for a similar emphasis see 2 Samuel 23:3 ff). The theme of law and justice is next applied to trade (11). When justice is held sacred at the top, it will insist that its sanctity will reach right down to grass roots level, Justice is God's, and therefore to violate it with false balances is to violate Him and sin against Him, The reason why doing evil is so serious for a ruler is that evil in them does something to the very structure of society itself, Given a righteous king (13), this will be his desire, to have right people around him, What a challenge for all who are in authority: In 14 and 15 we again have the idea of final authority: the king is the final court of appeal, and if that court is against us, it is all up with us; if it is for us, all will be well. And if this is true with respect to earthly rulers, how much more is it true with respect to the King of kings: Let us keep in with Him, this is our highest wisdom!

iii) 16:16-19

Perhaps 16 should be taken in relation to what was said at the end of yesterday's Note: to be wise, and to be 'in' with the King is real riches and wealth (cf 3,10, 11, 19), In 17 the AV rendering is better than RSV and should be followed. The meaning is that a holy determination to have nothing to do with what is wrong is the best safeguard for the soul. We generally fall in time of temptation when we are not determined enough not to! Once again, in 18, the warning against pride. The Greeks used to speak of 'hubris', the arrogance of the human spirit which always kindled the divine anger, and brought nemesis hurtling down unmistakably upon those guilty of it. It is interesting to realise that there is a great deal in Greek thought that is in line with Old Testament insights into human sin, its tragedy and failure lay in the fact that though it could analyse, it could give no answer to, the problem of man, Compare the 'better' in 19 with that in 8. The implication is that the seeming benefit goes to the proud and the unrighteous. But the true benefit, however unlikely it seems, lies in humility and poverty with righteousness. We are not far here from Jesus' words, 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul'. Bridges ends his comment on these last two verses with the words: "May my Lord's example keep me low: 'When majesty' - said pious Bernard - 'humbled himself, shall the worm swell with pride?!"

112) 16:20-24

These verses give a series of proverbs on wisdom applied to the various affairs of life. The RSV translates 20a 'He who gives heed to the word will prosper'. This is to take the Hebrew word in its primary meaning, The meaning then will be that if we take God's word seriously, opening our hearts to it in glad responsiveness and obedience, our lives will prosper; if we do not, they will not. This gives a good parallelism between 'giving heed to the word' and 'trusting the Lord' - the two things belong together. The AV reading however is possible also, and makes good sense. As Ironside puts it, 'To proceed wisely in a case presenting difficulties not readily overcome, is an earnest of coming good.' Let us suppose we are faced with a ticklish problem at work, the issue of which is clearly going to mean a great deal to all concerned. If we handle it unwisely, there will be a disaster; but if through the wisdom God has given us we deal with it rationally, sensibly, wisely, we shall find good. The message of 21, 23 and 24 merits consideration on its own, and we shall turn to it in tomorrow's Note but we shall take 22 here. 'Instruction' should read 'chastisement', as in RSV. The meaning appears to be that if the foolish will not be taught by wisdom, their own folly will serve as a rod to correct them. The fool is therefore his own worst enemy, and makes trouble for himself. This is folly indeed!

113) 16:20-24

The word 'learning' in 21 and 23 is rendered 'persuasiveness' in the RSV (cf 'fair speech' in 7:21). The theme is persuasiveness of speech. True wisdom makes one's speech pleasant and persuasive. Paul's words in Col 4:6 convey the meaning very well: 'Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt'. This is something that it is essential for us to learn. In discussion about the gospel, for example, it may be that a man is very good at argument and debate, so that with great thoroughness and ruthlessness he demolishes the other man's position. In such a situation, he may win an argument and lose a soul, by sheer hull-dogged aggressiveness. On the other hand, pleasant speech instead of that ruthlessness that his logical mind drives him to might have been much more persuasive for the gospel. There is little point in trying to witness for Christ if our whole approach and attitude causes extreme resentment. Being faithful is not the same as being objectionable, and we must not make the mistake of supposing that the only property of honey is cloying (24): on the contrary, it is health-giving. The mind of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips. Jesus once said, 'Be ye wise as serpents and harmless as doves'. One wonders whether He had these verses in Proverbs in mind when He said this. There are some things that the wise man will not say in certain circumstances - even if they are true - if he realises that saying them is going to be like showing a red rag to a bull. He will not make the mistake of blurting out everything in the most unwise sort of way. God give us this persuasiveness and wisdom!

114) 16:25-28

25 repeats the statement of 14:12, on which see Note. In 26, the RSV is to be preferred to the AV. What is being spoken of is incentives to hard work. Knox translates 'No better friend has drudgery than appetite; hunger drives a man to his task'. This is a relevant verse for wildcat strikers today. We suspect that such men would think twice before going on strike if they were not so sure of getting funds from Social Security. If there is a wife and family to feed and clothe, it is wonderful the incentive there is to work hard and honorably. That is one kind of mischief-making in society today; in 27-30 we are told of some others. 'Ungodly' in 27 is translated as 'worthless' in RSV. 'Diggeth up' is the usual O.T. word for plotting and scheming. The idea seems to be the kind of person who will ferret out information about people that can be harmful to their interests. Some people have a great nose for gossip; they always know everything that is going on. They can be very dangerous: The froward man who sows strife (28) acts like Samson when he set the foxes with firebrands tied to their tails among the Philistines' corn (Judges 15: 5, where the verb used is the same as here). How quickly the whole situation is alight! The metaphor changes in 28b, though not the damage that is caused. The whisperer takes a perverse delight in telling someone what his friend said, quoting out of context, and creating estrangement. How much misunderstanding and hurt he can cause, which sometimes a lifetime will not suffice to clear away or heal: This is, alas, too often experienced within the Christian Church itself. Those who indulge in such practices surely have sick minds; but it needs to be realised that it is a sin to be repented of as well as a sickness to be healed. Ugly things need to be called by their proper names!

115) 16:29-33

An alternative translation for 'violent' in 29 would be 'turbulent'. It may suggest the kind of man who carries everything and everyone before him. How easy it is for a strong, overbearing personality to sway and influence other people unduly, and lead them into things against their better judgment. 'Fair speech, coupled with what men call a magnetic presence, have often won the day, and led one, who would never have gone if left to himself, into a way that was not good' (Ironsides). 'Shutteth' in 30 means 'winks' (RSV). Here is the mischief-maker par excellence, who can convey meaning and do mischief simply by the wink of an eye, without a word being spoken. The RSV rendering of 30 omits the AV's 'if': this crown of glory is gained in a righteous life. Not all hoary heads are on righteous shoulders, but on a life that has been righteous it is an impressive sight. One rendering of 32 reads 'He who is slow to anger is better than a hero'. This is to get things in a true perspective. There are some very clay-footed heroes in our world today, especially in the sporting and entertainment scenes, many of them in need of psychiatric help for their disturbed personalities. But it takes a real man to control the self. And he is better than a commander that takes a city for this reason: he who rules his own spirit has conquered a world, let alone a city! The reference in 33 is to God's settling of matters referred to Him. It is clear that the casting of lots was one principal way in which the Lord's will was made known. It is perhaps significant that the last time this method was used was in the immediate pre-Pentecostal days when the apostles chose a twelfth apostle to replace Judas. The reasonable inference is that with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost another and better way of knowing the Lord's will was made available for the Lord's people.

116) 17:1-3

The reference in 1 is to the family feasts of Old Testament times, in which portions of the peace offerings were eaten by the offerer and his friends. The comment is that if strife and wrangling are present, the whole character of the feast is denied. One thinks of the New Testament parallel, in the disorderly behaviour at the Lord's Table in Corinth (1 Cor 11:17 ff). Paul's very blunt comments to these erring saints are very much to the point, and perhaps he had Proverbs in mind when he uttered them. In 2, the question is that of ability versus privilege. A dependable servant is better than a misbehaving son, as doubtless many a father has proved to his sorrow. Trials are for the believer (3) what the fining pot and the furnace are for the purifying of precious metals. Peter takes up this idea in his first epistle (1:6, 7). Kidney finely says, "God's trials are constructive: not for finding a person out, but for sorting him out." Here is another quotation, this time from C.S. Lewis, which underlines another thought: "God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn't. In this trial, He makes us occupy the dock, the witness-box and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realise the fact was to knock it down." A telling thought, is it not? This means that part of the function of the trial, and of the sorting out process, is to strip us down and strip away false foundations and false superstructures in order that true foundations and true superstructure may be built into and onto our lives, The truth is that faith, even when it is genuine and real, does tend to gather parasitic accretions, which are a hindrance to growth and development. It is these that must be cut away ruthlessly: God is not prepared to allow us to be unreal. Hence the fire. Only the pure gold can stand it: it is purified, and the rest is destroyed (of John 15:2).

117) 17:4-7

Wicked lips and the mischievous tongue on the one hand and evil doers and liars on the other go well together, and are well matched (4): and the match reminds us that sin has within it its own momentum; it is not static, but intensifies and gets worse all the time, moving from thought to word and from word to action, then to habit and character. For the thought expressed in 5, see Note on 14:31. In 5b, see, by contrast Moffatt's rendering of 1 Cor 13:6, 'Love is never glad when others go wrong'. But what are we to say, in this connection, of the imprecatory Psalms? Was not David glad at his enemies' calamities? The two things are not the same: here, it is the gloating over others' misfortunes, but in the Psalms it is rejoicing in divine righteousness - a very different thing. One commentator suggests that in 6 we have the picture of the ideal household, where government is administered according to God, and love rules all hearts. Not all homes, alas, are like this, nor are all families, but where the grace of God is regnant, they will become more and more like this, In such a situation, the aged will find their youth renewed in their grandchildren, and the young will revere their fathers. There is thus a 'two-way' traffic between the generations, instead of a gap. No thought here of children thinking their parents not 'with it' and old-fashioned, but rather fathers that sons are proud of, and children who are the crown of the aged. The meaning in both clauses of is that the association in each case is incongruous. According to Kidner the word translated 'fine' has the suggestion of excess in it - 'talking big'. But this is just what a fool is likely to do, only his is a false claim. The idea is that a man should be what he professes. If you are a prince, you should live in a princely way. If Rev 1:5, 6 is true of us, we should show it in our daily walk and demeanour.

118) 17:8-11

The AV margin reads 'bribe' for 'gift' in 8, and this is the true force of the word. The proverb speaks of the briber's confidence in the power of money to influence any situation, Money talks - this is his creed, and it includes, by implication, the belief that every man has his price, He is wrong, of course, for - thankfully - there are those who cannot be bought, at any price. The RSV's rendering of 9b has 'He who forgives an offence', which gives a rather different meaning. The AV takes it in the same sense as 10:12b, 'love covereth all sins'. Either way, however, to do so is a loving action, and love seeks an answering love in return. The concern is to promote love rather than bitterness. 'Repeateth' in 9b can be taken in two ways: either in the sense of gossiping and tale bearing, or in the sense of harping on about the matter with monotonous insistence. The gossip, or the man who will never let the matter drop - both are equally destructive of friendship. The message in 10 is that often a gentle hint or suggestion is enough for a wise man, for he 'gets the message' right away. It is the fool who is so insensitive that he needs a broadside. Are we slow to 'cotton on'? The man who is ruthless and lawless (11) can hardly expect gentle, treatment. This is a verse that is very relevant to many world situations today, and we need to be clear-sighted enough to see behind and beyond the crocodile tears that are sometimes wept for those whose violence draws upon them the firm and effective punishment meted out by the forces of law and order. Some people by their sentimentality are in danger of taking sides with violent and bloody revolution against the rule of law - and therefore against God. See Psalm 18:26b for the divine attitude to the rebelliousness of evil men.

119) 17:12-15

The statement in 12 about the fool may seem rather extreme, as if the writer were using hyperbole to make his point. But if we bear in mind all that Proverbs has already said about the fool, and remember that with him the potential for disaster is quite incalculable, we may have second thoughts about the extremeness of what is said. After all, one at least knows the issues when one meets a bear robbed of her whelps; with the fool, there is just no saying what might happen! The warning in 13 needs to be taken seriously because it is true on any level one likes to think of it, spiritual, moral, social, personal. An obvious biblical illustration of its truth is seen in the story of David and Bathsheba. It is a matter of history that the consequences of David's awful sin, forgiven though it was, dogged him for the rest of his days. The imagery in 14 (see RSV for a more graphic translation) is that of opening a sluice gate, and what is being said is that unless there is very strict control, far more water will come out than anticipated or intended. The beginning of strife is like this: it often needs only one unguarded moment for angry, ill-advised words to slip out. And once out, control can slacken, and damage can be done, in a matter of a few moments, that often a lifetime will not suffice to heal and repair. Well might the RSV urge, 'Quit before the quarrel breaks out!' In 15, compare Exo 23:7 and Isa 5:20, 23. When the ultimate and absolute distinction between good and evil begins to get blurred, then is the time to fear for society. Such an attitude is intolerable in the sight of Him Who is the Righteous Judge. The universe is built on absolute moral categories, and the attitude expressed in these words constitutes a blasphemy against the very principles of the created order. Judgment must be according to truth, for the world to stand.

120) 17:16-21

It is useless (16) for a man who has no taste for wisdom, and is not prepared for the discipline involved in obtaining it, to imagine it can be bought. No price can purchase it, for it is not for sale in this sense, In 17 the meaning is that 'in trouble you see what family ties are for, and you also see who are your friends' (Kidner). The quality thus indicated is priceless - it, too, cannot be bought (is there a contrast intended between 16 and 17 in this respect?) It can be abused, however, as 18 shows: friendship can be imposed upon, and if wisdom and discernment are not in control, embarrassing, not to say disastrous, situations can develop, It is the thought expressed fully in 6:1-5. The point is not refusal to help someone in need, but the danger of giving rash and in • judicious guarantees without thought (see Note for Tuesday, Sept. 18). We are probably meant to identify the man in 19 with the one in 20. Some people are argumentative not because they have anything worthwhile to argue about, but because they delight in contention. The kindest thing to do with such people is to give them a wide berth: at best they are simply boring, and a nuisance; at worst they can be extremely dangerous (20). 'There are, as we have seen in previous chapters, different kinds of fools, and perhaps the reference in 21 looks back on the previous verses with some feeling. At all events, sorrow rather than joy tends to fall to those who are associated with them. The words 'no joy' at the end of the verse have a tragic ring about them, as many a parent has proved.

121) 17:22-28

The regular feature in Reader's Digest, 'Laughter the Best Medicine' is thoroughly scriptural in title, and this is the theme of 22, and one which has already been underlined in 12:25 and 15:13,15 (see Note for Saturday Nov. 24), One further comment may be added: true merriment is possible only for those who take life, and themselves, and God seriously. The best New Testament counterpart is the word 'joy'. 'Merriment' is a good translation of that apostolic word,, because it is safeguarded from all parodies and caricatures by the serious undertones it must necessarily have. For the thought in 23, see 8. The RSV makes it clear that 'taketh' in AV means 'receiveth'. The emphasis is on the surreptitious nature of the transaction, and this is the connotation of the words 'underhand' and 'backhander', often used in such a context. The RSV rendering of 24, 'A man of understanding sets his face toward wisdom', makes the point of the verse clearer than the AV. The wise man's eyes look straight ahead, and concentration is the characteristic mark of his whole being. The AV, however, may be taken to mean that wisdom is there for the taking (in the sense in which this is emphasised in chapter 2), and not hard to come by. It is there for the fool also, but he does not see it, because of his restless and feckless attitude. He has no mind to learn it. Like those in 2 Tim 3:7, he is 'ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth'. The sentiment expressed in 25 is an oft repeated one in Proverbs, as if to suggest that it is a distressingly common experience, frequently encountered. The RSV renders 'to punish' in 26 as 'to impose a fine': even to fine a righteous man is bad; how much more to flog noble men for their uprightness - this seems to be the force of the proverb (so Kidner). Again in 28 the RSV is better followed. The meaning is that it is the simpleton who is always babbling. An ever-active tongue is no commendation to the discerning. The general advice in 28 is: 'Don't be more of a fool than you can help'. If at last the fool learns to be quiet, he has begun to learn sense.

122) 18:1-4

There are two different possibilities in the understanding of 1: one is to follow the old RV, and read, 'He that separateth himself seeketh (his own) desire, and rageth against all sound wisdom'. This will make its message a shrewd comment on the evil of a 'separatist' attitude, indicating that at its root lies a spirit of self-assertion (cf Jude 19). One thinks of the strong personality who prefers to be 'a big fish in a little pool' than 'a little fish in a big pool', with something of the spirit of Diotrephes 3 John 9) 'who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them'. On the other hand, the RSV has 'He who is estranged seeks pretexts to break out against all sound judgment', that is, being out of joint, he will go out of his way to be difficult (consciously or unconsciously). Either way, the verse has a good deal to teach us. It may be that there is a link between 1 and 2, and that the writer is thinking of the same person in both verses. Certainly both 'separatist' and 'out-of-joint' attitudes seem to have little concern for the difficulty and trouble they cause: at all costs they must express their opinion (RSV), which here in this context means expressing themselves - a fateful disclosure indeed, and one with often disastrous implications. If, as has been suggested, there is a link between 3 and the previous verses, we are given good cause to ponder the amount of trouble the words the writer uses represents. In 4 there is more about words. Here, a contrast seems intended between the reluctance of human nature to be open and frank (cf 20:5) and the clear and refreshing forthrightness of wisdom's well-spring. Perhaps, however, the verse can be taken as a simple statement conveying the benediction that a good man can be to others (cf John 7:38) nothing superficial there, but reservoirs of help and blessing.

123) 18:5-8

The thought in 5 echoes that in 17:26 (cf also 28:21). This repeated emphasis on the corruption of justice (through bribery and such like) indicates that it was a common occurrence in the writer's day. Moffatt renders 6, 'A fool's talk gets him into trouble'. There may be a contrast intended with 4. 'There is a development in 7, as if to suggest that if strokes (flogging, RSV), disaster and danger to the soul will result. The association of ideas in 8 with 6 and '7 is striking. There is an element of perversity in the foolishness that indulges in tale bearing that can prove to be a real snare to a man's soul. The AV's makes good sense, for there is nothing surer than that gossiping can do lasting hurt to those who are its unfortunate victims. The RSV translates differently, however, and 'wounds' become 'delicious morsels', the word being said to derive from a verb meaning 'to swallow greedily'. The meaning in 8b is that either passing on these tit bits, or receiving them from others, will do immense harm to our inmost being. People who indulge in this unsavoury habit tend to become known, and it is possible to forestall their avid recounting of the latest scandal by making it clear that one has no wish to hear. The question that this verse poses to us is: Are we channels, or terminals, for gossip?

124) 18:9-13

'Waster' in 9 has the sense of 'destroyer', and the challenging thought of the verse is that slackness in work is akin to destroying it. Not to bother oneself about the tasks that need to be done, through laziness or neglect, can do as much harm as doing positive injury to a work. This must surely have something to say in the context of the ongoing work of a congregation. The greatest damage the Church suffers is done not so much by those who are active destroyers as by those who simply neglect things. Two different kinds of security are contrasted in 10 and 11, and pose the question. Which would we rather be, a man of God or a man of property? The rich farmer in Luke 12:16-21 gives a graphic illustration of the 'conceit' mentioned in 11, not to say the self-deceit practised by all who seek refuge and security in material riches, which are uncertain indeed (1 Tim 6:17). For the thought expressed in 12, see 16:18, 19, A good illustration of the first part of the verse is found in 2 Chron 26:36, in the story of Uzziah and of the second part in 2 Chron 27:6, in that of Jotham. Jumping to conclusions, through rash, ill-considered judgment (13) can lead to endless trouble and embarrassment. It can also make us look very foolish. We are all too prone, on occasion, to do this, and need this salutary reminder, along with the similar comment in 17.

125) 18:14-18

The message in 14 is an important one: All will be well, whatever befall us, if only our spirit remain unbroken. If it breaks, everything comes crashing down. As Kidner puts it, "Short of outward resources, life is hard; short of inward, it is insupportable." This is why it is so important not only to guard our own spirits, but also seek to guard others' also. How better to do this than to make the joy of the Lord our strength (Neh 8:10)? 'The two verbs used in 15 seem significant: it is because the wise and prudent man seeks knowledge that he gets it. °A man's gift' in 16 can be interpreted in two ways: it can be taken in the derogatory sense in which it is used in 17:8, 23. Greasing an official's palm may give a man access to places and people he would never otherwise reach. But the phrase could be taken to mean 'the gift he has' rather than 'the gift he gives'. The meaning would then be that a gifted man does not need to push himself forward, for sooner or later his very giftedness will bring him to the forefront. People tend, by their sheer quality, to emerge to prominence. The RSV rendering of 17 makes its thought clearer than the AV (see also 13). One side of a story can often, with the best will in the world, give a very distorted picture of the truth. It may sound clear and unmistakable when heard, but it is always wiser, particularly in certain situations, and with certain people, to get the other side also. This can sometimes change the complexion of the matter entirely. We cannot be too careful. Kidner says of 18: °The Christian equivalent of the implied advice of this proverb is to seek God's leading, when interests or opinions clash, and to accept it with a good grace'. On the casting of lots see Note on 16:33.

126) 18:19-23

The AV rendering of 19 is more accurate and reliable than the RSV and should be followed here. The proverb bears witness to the strength of the invisible walls of estrangement and alienation, when once they are built between people. Prevention here is infinitely better - and easier - than cure: In 20 and 21, the latter gives content to the former. Words reap a harvest, good or evil, and will unerringly come to fruition. A chance word, for example, may mean a man's conversion. Life, in this sense, is in the power of the tongue, and when that word is spoken in the power of the Spirit, incalculable good may come. On the other hand, an unhallowed word can lead to a man's destruction. It is by no means unknown for someone to be so hurt and wounded and broken-hearted by an evil tongue as to commit suicide. There is more than one way of committing murder: The wording of 22 should be compared with 8:35. The resemblance is so striking as to be scarcely accidental, and this prompted Kidner to suggest that, next to wisdom, the best of God's blessings is a good wife. One commentator remarks, on 23, 'There is an evil genius in connection with great wealth that, if it be not closely watched against, dries up the milk of human kindness and hardens the heart against the needy. Let those whose temporal riches place them in the position to succour the poor, remember that the ear of God notes every unheeded cry of the poverty-stricken, and His eye beholds every ungracious action on the part of those who could relieve, but do it not.' More than this, however, 23a bears witness to the essential loss of human dignity that the poor suffers. Poverty does something to a man, in reducing him to such low-spiritedness,

127) **18:24**

There was not time in yesterday's Note to deal with these well-known words. The rendering of 24a is much disputed, as the various translations show:

"There are friends who only bring you loss" - Moffatt.

"Some companions are good only for idle chatter" – NEB.

"There are friends who pretend to be friends" – RSV.

"A man of many friends will suffer loss" – Ellicot.

The literal translation runs, "A man of friends is to be shattered", i.e. he that maketh many friends doeth it to his own destruction. The AV rendering is least likely, although its sentiment is deeply true: friendship is a 'two-way traffic, and no one can always expect to be at the receiving end without giving something in return, 'To do so shows an introspective and in-turned attitude of self-centredness that will devour friends and drain them dry, and still be craving in the end, This is a dangerous disease, and the sooner it is dealt with the better. Of the other renderings, Moffatt's is the most likely to be the right one, although the variant readings that give the RSV and the NEB yield significant lessons, If we follow Moffatt, the meaning would be a warning against indiscriminate friendships as being likely to produce some false and traitorous associations, 'This is not so far removed from the RSV's pretence of friendship, which reminds us that so-called friendship can sometimes be offered with ulterior motives, It is a desolating experience to feel one is being used by another and given 'friendship' only so long as one is useful, then cast aside as of no further interest, The word for 'friend' in 24b is a more positive one, and stands over against 'companions' in the NEB rendering of 24a. Of this true friend, Bridges remarks, 'But where shall we find the complete filling up of this exquisite picture, except in Him, who became our Brother, that he might cleave to us closer than a brother in tenderness and help,' and ends his comment on the verse with the words, 'Oh: let Him be the first choice of youth - the tried and chosen Friend of maturing age • the Friend for eternity!'

128) 19:1-3

The contrast in 1 and 2 is between the path of truth and the way of ignorance; but there are other contrasts at least implied. A poor man who lives in integrity adds something to his life it is rich in the things that matter. The other kind, mentioned in 1a, who is tacitly assumed to be rich or in better circumstances, perhaps through his cleverness or pretentiousness, is the real fool. He is really without knowledge in the things that matter, however 'clever' he may think himself to be. A man who hasteth with his feet (2b), that is, one who is intent on making short cuts to quick rewards, is one who is very likely to miss the real way of life. In every sphere, this comes to grief. When it does, and the man's folly brings him to ruin (3), it is never his own fault, it is God Who gets the blame. This attitude is as old as Eden: Adam blamed God for his sin - 'the woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat' - blaming God has been an inevitable tendency in man ever since. Perhaps we should apply this a little more than we do on the national scene. At the present time we are facing disturbing and disquieting problems, with recurrent crises in the economic and industrial scene. Where does responsibility lie? We blame the government, we blame the unions, we blame the communists - but it does not seem to occur to us that as a nation it is ultimately the way we live, in neglect and forgetfulness of God, that is to blame for our parlous situation, 'Where there is no vision, the people perish' (Prov 29:18). This is the lesson above all others that we as a people need desperately to learn.

129) 19:4-7

The theme in 4, 6 and '1, which should be taken together, is 'fair-weather friends', and what is said indicates once more that the writer of Proverbs is a shrewd and acute observer of life, well able to portray the harsh and rather unsavoury realities of society, The lesson they teach is by contrast i.e. , we who are Christians should determine that in these issues our standards will not be the standards of the world, We should start a new trend, and set a new example. We must be different, refusing to allow material circumstances to dictate moral and social attitudes in our relationships with our fellows. in tomorrow's Note we include a notable passage by Dr, James Denney which well underlines the true Christian position in these matters. In the meantime we remind ourselves that there is a way in which we can look at 4 rather differently: Jesus once spoke of making friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness so that they will meet us when we go to the everlasting habitations. It is possible to invest one's 'mammon', one's natural wealth, in gospel work, and in the end reap a harvest of souls. Wealth in this sense can make the best kind of friends, and we should thank God for those who thus invest their resources in the spread of the gospel, creating untold opportunities for the winning of men for Christ. The return on such investment is imperishable wealth and treasure.

130) 19:4-7

Here is the quotation from Denney, mentioned in yesterday's Note: "Those who are in Christ have died to the whole order of life in which men are judged 'after the flesh'. Perhaps the Christian Church has almost as much need as any other society to lay this to heart. We are still too ready to put stress upon distinctions which are quite in place in the world, but are without ground in Christ. Even in a Christian congregation there is a recognition of wealth, of learning, of social position, in some countries of race, which is not Christian, I do not say that these distinctions are not real, but they are meaningless in relation to Christ, and ought not to be made. To make them narrows and impoverishes the soul. If we associate only with people of a certain station, and because of their station, all our thoughts and feelings are limited to a very small area of human life; but if distinctions of station, of intelligence, of manners, are lost in the common relation to Christ, then life is open to us in all its length and breadth; all things are ours, because we are His. To be guided by worldly distinctions is to know only a few people, and to know them by what is superficial in their nature; but to see that such distinctions died in Christ's death, and to look at men in relation to Him who is Redeemer and Lord of all, is to know our brethren, and to know them not on the surface, but to the heart. People lament every-where the want of a truly social and brotherly feeling in the Church, and try all sorts of well-meant devices to stimulate it, but nothing short of this goes to the root of the matter, The social, in this universal sense, is dependent upon the religions, Those who have died in Christ to the world in which these separative distinctions reign will have no difficulty in recognising each other as one in Him. Society is transfigured for each one of us when this union is accomplished; the old things have passed, and all has become new."

131) 19:8-10

'Loveth his own soul' in 8 could be taken in a derogatory sense as it stands in the AV, but this is hardly the meaning. The word 'wisdom' (literally, it is 'heart') has the force of 'sense', and the meaning is that the man who finds such wisdom knows what is good for him, and 'is on to a good thing', as we say; and the 'good' he finds is true peace and lasting happiness and joy, 9 needs to be taken with 5: the first statement tells us that the perjurer shall not escape, the second what his doom will be, One has to recognise that false witness can remain undetected and that those who commit it appear to get off with it. But God sees it, and He will requite in the end. But it is not only at the end that the account is presented: there is often an interim settlement also, in terms of temporal, if not legal, judgment. Men reap what they sow during this life as well as at its end, Both phrases of 10 speak of conditions that are opposed to what is right and orderly, Position and station in life are good in themselves (whatever the egalitarians may say); but it is one thing to want to better one's position - this is good, proper and to be desired - but it is quite another thing to let overweening desire determine to reach to the top, for that is to challenge God Himself which, the verse implies, is what fools and foolish servants do, We should think very clearly about the kind of implication that a verse like this has for us.

132) 19:11-14

We resume our readings in Proverbs. 'Discretion' in 11 is translated 'good sense' in RSV. The theme here is magnanimity. Uncontrolled temper bespeaks a spirit that has never been brought under discipline, and to be lacking in control here is also to be lacking in sense. The thought in 12 continues the theme. Even in a king, being angry is a sign of weakness and unpleasantness. How much better to overlook an offence, and be like dew on grass: This latter metaphor suggests fruitfulness, and it is not difficult to see how such an attitude pays considerable dividends in human relationships. Kidner entitles his comments on 13, 14, 'Hell or heaven at home', and this is an apt title. This is grass-roots family life indeed: (The sentiment expressed here is amplified in 27:15, 16). One wonders whether there is a connection implied between the nagging wife and the foolish son. One commentator suggests there is, pointing out that "where the wife disputes her husband's authority and takes sides with the children, in opposition to his proper discipline, the effect upon them will be anything but good". This bears out the importance for true family well-being of father and mother being at one and in unity in the discipline and upbringing of children (see 1:8, 9, 6:20, and comments thereon). Children do not need much encouragement to play off one parent against the other, and this can be nipped in the bud effectively only when there is a united and unified approach to family discipline. In 14b, the RSV replaces the AV's 'and' with 'but', and this serves to make the intended contrast clear: you cannot inherit a good wife as you inherit property from parents or relatives. That must be given by the Lord.

133) 19:15-17

Slothfulness trifles away opportunities that will never return. This is its seriousness and its tragedy (15). The verse implies the failure to appreciate the value of time. This is as true in the spiritual realm as in the natural. To fail, through laziness or complacency, to bestir oneself to procure suitable sustenance for the soul will bring want and hunger and spiritual famine. Paul says 'Redeem the time' - a very pointed and significant phrase. To 'redeem' means 'to buy back', and it is a question of buying time from other things (often at considerable cost) if we are going to have time for spiritual things. This is a price that some are not prepared to pay. The emphasis in 16a is similar to that in 8, and in 16b 'shall die' is better rendered 'shall be put to death'. It is not the natural process that is being referred to, but an act of judgment. We have to reckon with the Judge, when we neglect the things of the Spirit. There is a direct link between 17 and our Lord's words in Matt 25:40, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these....' The implications of the verse are considerable. The silver and the gold are the Lord's, and the cattle on a thousand hills, yet He puts Himself in the position of the poor, He is down there with them, in their need, identifying Himself with their poverty. 17b speaks of faithful recompense, rather than getting back what one has given.

134) 19:18-21

The RSV rendering of 18 should be followed, giving the meaning that failure to discipline one's son is tantamount to destroying him, A mistaken sense of leniency is a killer: This has been borne out by recent observations by psychiatrists to the effect that the problems caused by the strict disciplining of children are much more amenable to treatment than the problems caused by giving them a free hand and allowing them to do as they please. In 19 the teaching is that a quick temper that has refused discipline will be a constant and repeated source of trouble to the one who displays it. Therefore, on the basis that prevention is better than cure, such an one should be referred to 11 and 12, and advised to give these verses earnest study and consideration, The implication in 20 is that it is not a very great compliment to anyone to land up in middle age and still be a fool, and still not have learned anything worth learning, Wisdom is a long-term investment, There may be a connection between 20 and 21 -certainly the acquisition of wisdom is in the Lord's will for us, and if our many and ambitious plans for our own lives are not in line with the counsel and purpose of the Lord, they will come to grief, and we will too, if we hold on to them. This is one of the areas in life where we can see how practical the doctrine of divine sovereignty is. The old saying, 'Man disposes, God proposes' is a very true one, here as elsewhere in life.

135) 19:22-25

The RSV reading in 22 is probably the best translation, 'What is desired of a man is loyalty', although an alternative rendering, 'The charm of a man is his kindness' makes good sense. With the RSV, the meaning is that when a man is loyal, he is infinitely to be preferred to a man of the greatest gifts and capabilities who is disloyal when it suits him. There are some situations in life - particularly spiritual life in which loyalty is the greatest and most important thing of all, overshadowing and outshining every other consideration. The blessings of true godliness are in view in 23. The meaning is not that the godly man will never suffer evil, but rather that evil will not harm him (cf Ps 46:1, 2), since he dwells in the secret place of the Most High, under the shadow of the Almighty, and Paul's great word in Romans 8:28 will be fulfilled in him. The comical picture in 24 makes the point well - the words of the RSV read like a standard joke: 'He is so lazy that...'. In 25 we have another example of Proverbs' invariably realistic attitude to wrongdoing: it must be dealt with. Here, it is the deterrent value of punishment, and it is the language a fool will understand - often, indeed, the only language. Some people have to learn the hard way. It is no hardship to a wise man to be reproved, "for the truth itself is of greater value in the eyes of him who has understanding than his own dignity" (cf 1 Tim 5:20).

136) 19:26-29

The story of the prodigal son readily comes to mind in reading 26. It has been pointed out that Jesus made no mention of the prodigal's mother. Perhaps she had been chased away in the sense indicated here. It may mean that the son's behaviour at home has become so intolerable that she cannot stand to be in his presence any more. One has known mothers to be afraid of their sons like this, and terrified to check them lest they turn in violence against them. The 'reproach' refers to the special bitterness of receiving such treatment from a son. In 27, the RSV omits the AV's 'that causeth', and substitutes 'only' to give a warning against trifling: to receive instructions only to pay no heed to it is moral irresponsibility. Why ask advice, if we have no real intention of taking it? 'Ungodly' in 28 literally means 'worthless', but is generally used of that which is opposed to God. What seems to be in view here is the committing of perjury in a court of law. Fortunately, this is something that is regarded with the greatest seriousness in our legal system, and carries heavy penalties. The second part of the verse seems to imply, to use Kidner's phrase, a spiritual morbidity, a diseased-ness of mind and heart that takes pleasure in perversity, for perversity's sake. This is the advanced and abandoned state of evil spoken of by Paul in Romans 1:32, which earns the inevitable judgment of God spoken of in 29. When men come to this stage in the grim progression of evil, they are ripe for judgment, and God will ultimately bring it upon them (cf 29:1).

137) 20:1

It is singularly appropriate that we should come to the opening words of this chapter on the opening day of the new year, when the ravages of strong drink are seen in all their squalid ugliness and shame. Hogmanay is not something for Scotland to be proud of: The question that arises here is: Temperance or Abstinence? There can be little doubt, on any fair reading of Scripture, that it is temperance rather than abstinence that can be deduced from the relevant passages. But having said this, we must also go on to say something else. There are principles embedded in Scripture too, and we must recognise, firstly, that in view of the disastrous and tragic consequences that the use of alcoholic liquor has for countless lives and homes and families, and secondly, in view of the danger of setting a bad example to others, abstinence must surely be seen; not as an option, but as a bounded duty, for believers, No other vice has so cursed the world and caused such awful misery and suffering as drunkenness. Should not this fact be sufficient for people of true Christian compassion? And what of Paul's teaching in Romans 14 on the power of example, and the possibility of making a weaker brother stumble? And did not Jesus say we are to love the Lord our God with our minds as well as our hearts? If even slight alcoholic influence impairs the mind, how can we fulfil His injunction honorably? Consider the word 'mockery', It is the deceit that alcohol practises on people that is in view, not merely in the falsity of its claim to satisfy their needs and desires, but - even more serious - in the undoubted fact that it so often betrays people into addiction, Few alcoholics ever meant to let it take such a grip on them: most are duped and deceived into their terrible plight. It is too late then for them to cry, 'What a fool I've been:' Resist beginnings - this is the only true wisdom,

138) 20:2-5

The moral in 2 seems to be: Watch what you are doing, and be sensible, not tactless, in face of authority. We can hardly complain about coming to grief, if we have asked for it, Authority is a reality, and those who kick against it may forfeit their life (RSV), certainly their wellbeing. There is a good deal for us in 3: our attitude under provocation, whether real or imagined, is very revealing, We cut ourselves down to size by our reactions - by our touchiness, by the ease with which we seem to allow ourselves to be provoked. Here is a mirror for us - let Us look into it to see what manner of people we are: The sluggard (4) is an oft-recurring figure in Proverbs: here he is given a cold dash of realism that may serve to jolt him out of his world of make-believe, To use Paul's words in 2 Thess 3:10, if he will not work, neither should he eat. 'There was no social security in those days to subsidise idle malingerers: Today, work -stoppages in the cold season have become a powerful anti social weapon to disrupt the country and cause untold hardship to many. When will we become realistic and call things by their proper names? The theme in 5 is discernment, and with this gift a man of understanding can discern the intentions of another man's heart. The picture is of some crafty schemer, secretly devising ill to others, and having his clandestine plans penetrated and exposed by someone with discernment enough to see through him, and bring them to nought. Happy and fortunate the society where such discernment obtains!

139) 20:6-12

These verses are linked together by the common theme of rectitude and integrity of life. In 6, the contrast is between profession of loyalty and reality (cf Note on 19:22). The man of integrity (7), who is really just and faithful, will manifest that integrity in his daily walk, not by the declarations of his lips. This, as 7b implies, is the true pattern for family life. No one is perfect, but though a man be not perfect, he can be true, and with truth shining through, even in his confession of his mistakes and failures, the message gets home. The integrity has an entail with it, and carries through to the next generation. 'Scattereth' in 8 is rendered 'winnows' in RSV, and the meaning is that the discerning eye of the ruler can sift the chaff from the wheat in those that surround him. Modern politics give some glaring examples of the consequences of failure to do so. All attainment (9) in the areas of either 7 or 8 is approximate; all men fail and fall short, and those who are most concerned for integrity are often most conscious of how far short of it they have fallen. The theme in 10 is lack of integrity in business life. For a full comment on the theme, see Note on 11:1 (Sat. 20th October). In 11, an alternative translation reads 'Even in his play, a child makes himself known', but the AV sense is equally good. Whether in children or in adults, actions are a fair index of character. It is interesting to note that a child's character is as much of concern to God as an adult's. 'Hearing' in 12 is equivalent to 'obedient' and 'seeing' to 'understanding'. Both are the gift of God's grace and God's work in the soul.

140) 20:13-16

For the thought in 13, see 4, and 6:9-11. It is a word with many applications. The warning is against letting opportunity slip. In the Note on 19:15-17 (Fri. 28th November), we spoke of 'redeeming the time'. Here is a corollary: to open one's eyes is to see much opportunity around us. There is so much that is obvious which is just not seen - things that need to be done, people that need to be helped - because eyes are closed and people are insensitive, and suffer from a basic unwillingness to put themselves about. The writer is not afraid to impute a slovenly spirit to those who go about with their eyes shut. The picture in 14 is of the man who drives a dishonest bargain. Kidner's comment is illuminating: "We may find here a sketch; also a business man's warning to the inexperienced; perhaps, too, a parable, for there are also immaterial assets which we can be talked into selling lightly (Heb 12:16)". The gold and rubies in 15 are kinds of adornment, and the point that is being made is similar to that made by Peter in 1 Pet 3:3 ff. Lips of knowledge are something that adorns a life far more than any outward jewels can do. In 16, see 6:1-5 and 11:15. The meaning is: beware of lending without security to someone who is known to be a bad risk, for It can lead only to trouble, Keeping clear of involvement is the only safe path. Again, there is no thought of withholding kindness or help from a brother in need, Shrewdness and down to-earth wisdom, not hard heartedness, is the keynote.

141) 20:17-21

The thought in 17 is similar to that in 9:17,18 - sin's aftermath – and aftertaste: (cf Heb 11:25). The final result of sin belies its earlier, attractive promises. Our Lord's words in Luke 14:31, 32 are echoed in 18; which is similar to 11:14 in its emphasis. The message is clear: beware of finalising plans until you consult with people whose judgment you can trust. In face of this - an oft-repeated emphasis what price the rash and impulsive behaviour that passes for spiritual action in so many believers? In 19, which repeats the thought of 11:13, the warning is against the danger a gossiping tongue can be- Kidner remarks, "The point of the first line is that it may be your secrets next"! There is a very solemn warning in 20 against unfilial behaviour. It is the obverse of the fifth commandment (Exo 20:12) and Paul's injunction in Ephes 6:1. It is something to be taken seriously. Parents stand to children in God's stead, even when they are bad parents, just as the powers that be are ordained of God even when they are bad rulers, and parents are to be honoured for their position, if their person cannot be honoured, And if the promise of the fifth commandment - 'that thy days may be long in the land' - is demonstrably true in human experience, can we suppose that the converse here will simply go by default? In 21, which is a companion piece to 13:11, the meaning is that "those who set out with the determination to gather wealth at all cost will learn in bitterness of soul that they have missed the true and lasting treasure which would have given heart -satisfaction and joy in its possession" (Ironsides)- See Jer 17: 11, and James 5:1-6. Is this a word in season to strikers who blackmail the nation by their exorbitant demands?

142) 20:22

Here is a worthy and challenging comment on this verse from Ironside's commentary: "No lesson is harder for some of us to learn than that of confiding all our affairs to the hands of the Lord, especially when we feel we have been wronged and ill-treated. Yet it is plain from Scripture that the saint can make no greater mistake than to take charge of his own affairs in such a case. Nothing could be clearer than the injunction 'Recompense to no man evil for evil....' (Rom 12:17 ff). To set about meting out evil for evil in the face of words like these is to act in direct disobedience to God, and we need not wonder if we make a terrible botch of it all. He who, owning that all has been allowed by the Lord for his good, bows his head and bends before the blast, will find God ever ready to interfere at the needed moment. To look away from the human instrument of our grief, however vindictive he may be, and to see, behind it all, the purposes of our Father working out, gives rest and comfort to the sorely-tried soul. It was this that sustained David when Shimei cursed and stoned him (2 Sam 16:5-12). It is doubtful if, in all David's spiritual history, he ever reached a higher height of holy confidence in God than at this time of deep, deep trial. Shimei's spiteful cursing in so public a manner, and at so sorrowful a time, must have deeply lacerated his already wounded spirit. But he bows his head in submission; and instead of executing vengeance on Shimei, and seeking self-vindication from the charges made, 'though evil report and good report' he holds on his way, in submissive confidence, saying, 'Let him curse', and taking all from the Lord Himself. Shimei was but an instrument, inspired by Satan, yet really permitted of the Lord, for David's chastening and discipline. As such he views him, and looks not at second causes, but at the great First Cause Himself. This is most blessed: Would that every tried saint could follow his example!"

143) 20:23-28

For 23, see the comment on 10. Jeremiah 10:23,24 emphasises the same truth as 24, and the thought is similar to that in 3:5,6 (see Note for Saturday, 1st September). Happy the man who really believes that "my times are in His hand": The AV of 25 is very obscure, and RSV gives a more probable, and much more intelligible rendering, in the words, "It is a snare for a man to say rashly, 'It is holy', and to reflect only after making his vows." The picture this gives is of an impulsive man, pledging more than he seriously intends (so Kidner). For a comment on the kind of situation envisaged, see Eccles 5:4-7 (cf Jesus words in Mark 7:11, 'It is Corban'). The emphasis in 26 is topical and relevant. There can be no peace and security in a nation when lawlessness and violence are rampant. It is a duty of government to punish lawbreaking and evil, and it is a duty that cannot be neglected without peril. The upholding of law and order need not, of course, be harsh and repressive: mercy, as well as truth (28) must temper the action and legislation of governments. Moral flabbiness, however, is neither merciful nor right, and is an attitude that no government can afford to indulge. In 27 the reference is to conscience, which is God's monitor in the soul. It is true that conscience is not an infallible guide, since the Fall has vitiated it; but under the control of the Spirit of God in a renewed life it is a redoubtable weapon in the divine armoury, searching out all man's inmost being.

144) 20:29-30

Of 29 Kidner says that it is 'a proverb to lift the reader above the unfruitful attitudes of envy, impatience and contempt which the old and the young may adopt towards each other. Each age has its appointed excellence, to be respected and enjoyed in its time'. Implicit in this is the New Testament doctrine of membership: we are members in particular of the body of Christ, and therefore dependent on one another. When this is understood, it disposes of the generation gap. The AV's 'blueness' in 30 is misleading, and the RSV is preferable, with its 'Blows that wound' The literal translation of the Hebrew is 'strokes of bruising', and the meaning, according to Kidner, is 'a severe beating'. The verse therefore stands as a vindication of corporal punishment. One recalls the Psalmist's words (119:67), 'Before I was afflicted, I went astray but now have I kept Thy word'. The moral power of correction is seen in the Scriptures to be very considerable. In a more general reference to spiritual life, the proverb is just as true: the determined probing of God's pruning knife can be extremely painful; but it is a cleansing and purifying pain, and often the only way to promote healing. Ironside adds, "As he would be an unwise patient who objected to the pain caused by the surgeon while he endeavoured to free the wound from impurities that might effectually hinder healing, and which, if unremoved, might poison the whole system, so is the saint foolish indeed who repines under a Father's chastening hand, and seeks to free himself from the stripes rather than to 'hear the rod, and Him who hath appointed it (Mic 6:9)'"

145) 21:1-4

The picture envisaged in 1 is of irrigation canals under the farmer's control. It is he, the farmer, who decides where the water will flow. This, says the writer, is how God controls not only the lives of men but also the powers that be. One thinks of the wonderful examples of the divine over-ruling in the affairs of empires and dynasties for the furthering of God's purposes in His people and in His word - Cyrus, Artaxerxes, and others who, autocratic and despotic as they were, were 'manipulated' by the hand of the living God for the fulfilment of His strategy of grace. It is wonderfully comforting and encouraging to realise that He is the God of history, and that He holds the whole world in His hand, The thought in 2 virtually repeats 16:2, on which see Note, Thursday, 29th November and compare Paul's words in 1 Cor 4:3,4. The emphasis in 3 is an important one in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. The whole problem about the sacrificial cultus was that it tended - by its very insistence that atonement could be made only by something out-side man - to obscure the truth that heart attitudes were important to God. This the prophets all thundered out ceaselessly (cf Mic 6:8, Isa 1, Isa 58). The AV margin reads 'light' instead of 'plowing' in 4, and this is the correct reading, as the RSV indicates. The light or lamp of the wicked seems simply to mean their life; so that what is being said is that when 'Haughty eyes and a proud heart' represent the whole of life, this is sin in the sight of God. It is, alas, true that this is all that some people live for. The emptiness of the social climber's existence is appalling, for those who have eyes to see.

146) 21:5-7

These verses belong together in their general thought. In 5a the message is clear: a man whose primary concern is to be absolutely thorough in everything he does will count for something, and his life will tell in society. He will be known as a certain kind of man. If he is in industry, he will have a reputation for integrity; if he is a tradesman, people will know who to go to, to get a job well done. Thoroughness always tells. By contrast (5b), the 'hasty' man - here the word has the force of a 'thruster' or 'go-getter' - comes to want. In this word, Proverbs challenges a whole philosophy of life: the 'get-rich-quick' attitude, with short cuts to wealth, which occupies so many people's waking moments and has made modern society such a querulous and dangerously discontented place. Worse still, when such a philosophy grips people, it can lead to dishonesty (6), and the getting of treasure by a lying tongue becomes justifiable to them. If they cannot come by it honestly they will not scruple to be dishonest. Then 7 becomes almost inevitable, and ruin will stare them in the face. What is not realised is that there is something inherently self-destructive in the principle of evil; it inevitably leads men down and ultimately destroys them. As the Apostle James says (1:14, 15): 'Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren'. There is more than enough in these words for one day's meditation. Surely their message to us is: Resist beginnings:

147) 21:8-11

'Froward' in 8 means 'guilty'. The meaning of the verse is that if you have a clear conscience you will have a clear path. It is a sign that something is radically wrong when a person's path is crooked, and he has to be continually excusing and explaining. On the other hand, a man who walks in the light as God is in the light will be above reproach, and his life will be like an open book which explains itself. 9 gives us one of Proverbs' characteristic flashes of humour (it is repeated in similar terms in 19). The RSV translation is said to be more accurate than AV, and we should read the second part of the verse as 'a house shared with a contentious woman'. Kidner sums it up well when he speaks of choice between ignominious solitude and intolerable society'. 'There is a lot to be said for quietness, even in a corner of the house: There is a serious, even sinister, note in 10, in the word 'desireth', which indicates that the man in question is set upon evil. There are two constituent elements in all sin - the wayward element, flowing from the weakness of man's makeup, which draws forth the compassion of Christ, and also the sinister, spiritual element, which partakes of the demonic. When this latter element takes the ascendancy in man he becomes utterly given over to sin and approaches the point of identification with it. It is this that is indicated here. There is an echo of 19:25 in 11, and we find its New Testament counterpart in 1 Tim 5:20, Perhaps Paul has this verse in Proverbs in mind when he wrote thus. There is a great realism here: when the man who resists the truth is allowed to go unrebuked, it strengthens his position in the eyes of the ignorant, and this is not something to be acquiesced in by the realistic Christian counsellor.

148) 21:12 14

One is reminded in 12 of the well known words in Psalm 37, 'Fret not thyself because of evil doers', The Psalm gives the assurance that evil will not finally triumph in the world, and this is what seems to be indicated here, The words in italics in the AV indicate that there are problems in translation, and Kidner suggests that the meaning may well be that God is the Righteous One, or possibly, an appointed and lawful ruler. It is true that both God and the righteous ruler can bide their time and at the appropriate moment take action against evildoers- It is the divine prerogative to do so, and when divine authority is delegated to a ruler, it is his prerogative also, 'There is an echo in 13 of 19:11, which gives us the more positive side. The commentators refer us to Luke 16:19-31 and Matt 26:31-46 as the inevitable consequences of the attitude expressed here. And one is prompted to wonder whether 13b may serve to explain why sometimes believers who cry to the Lord seem to be left in need and their prayers not heard. Is it because of some past heartlessness on their part? 'This is something that will bear thinking about. 'Reward' in 14b is 'bribe' in the RSV, and with this meaning the proverb holds the kind of warning that we saw in 18:16, But it could be taken to mean that 'doing good', a genuine desire to pour oil on troubled waters, if done quietly and without display, may well heal a very difficult situation, and soothe ruffled feelings. It may be thought a pity that such a thing should ever be needed, but then, people do get ruffled, and sometimes too easily. We have to accept life as it is not as we think it should be.

149) 21:15-17

The AV's 'to do judgment' in 15 is translated 'When justice is done', and although this departs from the usual meaning of the phrase as an expression for right conduct, it suggests an important thought. It is sometimes said that it is not possible to run a business on strict Christian principles, because it would never pay. If, then, a man makes a conscience of doing justly and living honourable in business, it may be a source of dismay to those who have capitulated too easily to the 'necessity' of compromise, and a goad to their conscience. Perhaps this is the force of 16 - how easy it is in business life to wander from true integrity: We should look well at the consequences of such an attitude, as they are expressed in 16b. The theme may well continue in 17: the temptation to dishonesty and a double standard (15) is that of 'easy money' and a 'get-rich-quick' attitude to life. The difference underlined is that between hard-working honesty and integrity, which are their own reward, and the love of pleasure and ease that makes for improvidence. This should be borne in mind in an age when 'soak the rich' has become a blind for an attack on those who show reasonable prudence and frugality and who are prepared to impose on themselves a certain amount of discipline for the sake of a more secure future. One reason why the 'haves' have more than the 'have-nots' may be that the 'have-nots' blow what they have on colour TV and continental holidays instead of denying themselves to pay off a mortgage. You could get a pretty fair sized house for the price of forty cigarettes a day (man and wife) over a period of years!

150) 21:18-24

The meaning of 18 should probably be sought in the similar statement in 11:8 (which see). One thinks of different ways in which such a word is fulfilled, as for example when the wicked fall into the pit they have dug for the righteous, or when wicked nations have been visited by God in order to effect the liberation of His own people. The thought in 19 has already been dealt with in the Note on 9. In 20 and 21, a similar contrast is presented to that in 17. It is an advocacy of thrift and prudence in living, and a critique of the spendthrift attitude mentioned in yesterday's Note. The point made in 22 is that brain, not brawn, is what carries the day. A wise man can do so very much more than a merely strong one. It is not difficult to see the link this has with Paul's famous words in Ephes 6:10 ff. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds. The Christian warfare demands spiritual wisdom if it is to be waged successfully. 'Least said, soonest mended' is an apt summary of 23 (cf James 3:2-12 for the devastating harm an uncontrolled tongue can do). The RSV rendering of 24 is more graphic than AV. When one considers how deadly the scoffer's attitude is (cf 9:7, 8, 13:1, 14:6, 15:12, 19:25, 21:11, 24, 22:10, 24:9, 29:8), it is not surprising that judgments are prepared for him (19:29).

151) 21:25-31

We have another picture of the sluggard in 25 and 26. Here we see that wishing is his substitute for working, or - to put it more colloquially, his wish-bone is where his back-bone should be. A little consideration of these verses will bring their message home disturbingly to us. If there are some things that we never quite get around to doing, much as we might wish to, we had better ask ourselves whether it is because we are basically lazy. Our hearts may be in the right place, but - well, handwork cannot be done by hearts; it needs hands, and this man's hands will not work. He tells himself he must do it, but he pays no attention to the exhortation: For the thought in 27, compare 3, also 15:8. One recalls the scathing indictment of the people of God by Isaiah (1:10ff), and our Lord's terrible condemnation of the Pharisees' hypocrisy in the gospels. In 28, the 'man that heareth' means the man who hears carefully the evidence and repeats it accurately in any particular case that arises, or -more generally - the man whose aim is to know and understand, 'Constantly' in 28b will then have the force of 'unchallenged' or 'enduring'. The metaphor in 29 corresponds to what we mean when we say of some one that he has a 'brass neck', A bold face (to change the metaphor slightly) may deceive some people some of the time, but it will not deceive all the people all the time. Someone is sure to see through the disguise, and deal with it accordingly. If this be true on the human level, how much truer in relation to God (30): He is much too clever for man to pit his puny strength against Him. Of the last verse of the chapter Kidner says, "If verse 30 warns us not to fight against the Lord, 31 warns us not to fight without Him. It condemns, not earthly resources, but reliance on them".

152) 22:1-5

The first 16 verses of this chapter conclude the section of the book that began at 10:1. From 22:17-24:34 we have 'The words of the wise', which are again followed by more of Solomon's utterances (25:1-29:27). In 1, the contrast is between treasure on earth and treasure in heaven. Kidner says, 'Not the power we yield, but the love in which we are held, is our proper joy'. Character is the only thing we can take with us, so we should aim to have that to 'go home' with. This is the true riches. And, we should note well there is a freedom of choice in this: it is open to us to win a good name. There is one sense in which the statement in 2a is not true, for a great gulf is fixed between the rich and the poor. But in the really significant issues they do meet - in the matter of a good name, for example, one's possessions mean precisely nothing. Quality is everything. In extremities of illness, woe and death, there is also only one level, and rich and poor meet there, as they do also at the Cross where repentance is concerned. The statement in 3 should be applied to the matter of hasty ill-considered action. The prudent man can look ahead and see the possible consequences of an action that he might take and seeing them take steps to adjust matters and prevent himself making a wrong move. This is wisdom; and it is the very folly to forge ahead unthinkingly without considering the consequences of doing so. Some people learn only the hard way. 4 and 5 seem to belong together, and present a contrast in ways and ends. 'Riches' in 4 can be taken in either a literal or a metaphorical sense, the thought is similar to that in 1: a 'good name' is honour and life too. 5 is true because there is a moral order in the universe. The world is so constituted that the way of the transgressor is hard.

153) 22:6

This is an immensely important verse for parents, and for all who have in any way the care of the young, and it merits careful study. We should note first of all that the word is 'train' not 'tell'. What is advocated here is not telling a child the way he should go. What of children who will not 'take a telling'? Sometimes parents and teachers are in some concern even distress, with children at particular ages when they seem less and less biddable and they reproach themselves for having failed. But children's difficulties should not necessarily and certainly should not ultimately, discourage, for it is not a 'telling' that constitutes 'training'. Children have to be trained into taking a telling and such training a progressive and often painstaking business. We should think of this in terms of 'imparting a skill' and of 'on the job' training, such as an apprentice in a trade receives. It takes time to turn him into a qualified mechanic, and the process is not without its mistakes, sometimes serious for the trainee and its frustrations for the instructor. Kidner usefully points out that the training is 'according to his (the child's) way' implying respect for his individuality and vocation, though not for his self will. This is an important qualification, in both directions: on the one hand it excludes the harsh and meaningless domination of a child, and on the other, it safeguards against allowing self-will to remain unchecked and run rampant, with the disastrous consequences that usually follow. We shall continue our discussion of this verse in tomorrow's Note.

154) 22:6

There is a sense in which a child does not 'have it in him' to live properly, because of the Fall, any more than an apprentice has it in him to be a mechanic, although he may have an aptitude in things mechanical. In the same way, inasmuch as a child is made in the image of God, he has the basic aptitude; but if he is left to his own devices, he will certainly 'go to the dogs'. Hence the need for training. Kidner's comment is again worthy of study: "Proverbs is well known for its praise of the rod. Its maxim 'he that spareth his rod hateth his son' (13:24) is a corollary of its serious doctrine of wisdom; for if wisdom is life itself (8:35, 36), a hard way is better to it than a soft way to death....The way has to be hard, for two reasons. First, 'foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child': it will take more than words to dislodge it (22:15). Secondly, character (in which wisdom embodies itself) is a plant that grows more sturdily for some cutting back - and this from early days....In 'a child left to himself' the only predictable product is shame (29:15)." It is salutary to have such a statement before us, in a day when we have become so bedevilled by psychology that some people are almost afraid to look at a child lest they create a complex in it that will twist all its future. We are now reaping the sorry harvest of decades of such thinking, in the problems we face with young people today. If, however, the vision of what this verse implies lays hold of us, children will be brought up to adjust to situations that when they become adults they will be real adults, not emotional and psychological juveniles who will never grow up. Most of the major problems in this area of society, and in the Christian Church, are caused by people with arrested development, adults in years and in body, but infants in moral and emotional stature. When children are trained, however, with all due regard to their individuality and vocation, but with short shrift given to their self-will, then when they reach adult life, something will have been done in them, and they will have been set in a particular course.

155) 22:7-11

The message in 7, making a practical observation without necessarily commending it, seems to be: beware of falling into debt. The question arises as to why the borrower had to borrow, and whether he ought, in the first place, to have allowed himself into such a position. We may recall Paul's words in Ephes 4:28 in this connection: hard work and diligence should not only keep a man out of debt, but put him in a position to help those who are more needy than himself. In 8 and 9 we are given a contrast in lifestyles; and harvest-time will be very revealing in either case. Again, the stress is on the moral order in the universe. We should note particularly what is said in 9 about the 'bountiful eye'. It is the generous spirit, not the rich, that gives bountifully. The heart for it must be there, before true generosity can be seen. The scoffer (10) is one who can work untold mischief in a fellowship, and his influence is so pervasive that, if unchecked, will act with leaven, leavening the whole lump. It is for this reason that both our Lord and Paul recognised that in some situations the firm discipline of excommunication may be necessary (cf Matt 18:17, 1 Cor 5:11-13). This is the only way for the fellowship to be preserved from falling into unholy ways, and for the name of Christ to be kept from dishonour. The peace and well-being that ensues when such drastic action is taken should be a considerable assurance that the action was both right and justified. In 11 the RSV rendering clarifies the AV. Kidner refers to 'the equal partnership of integrity and charm' that is indicated, Integrity of life and grace of demeanour constitute a combination that makes a man kingly in bearing, and he can command the best kind of friendship. Well might he number royalty among those who will love and cherish him.

156) 22:12-16

Once again, in 12 we have the emphasis on the moral order in the universe. God is watching how things are going, and will always, ultimately, vindicate His truth and overthrow the words of the faithless (RSV) - faithless in the moral, social and spiritual senses. The sluggard makes his appearance once again, in 13. The message here is that the man who is always raising objections and difficulties when action is proposed may well ask himself whether his basic problem is plain laziness. He should remember the line of the hymn which says, 'If hopes are dupes, fears may be liars'. Fears in fact are often liars, and it is not only the sluggard that is paralysed by them. Timid timorous spirits need a word like this: it encourages them to be bold, brave and daring. It is sometimes possible to be so frightened of going against God's will that one just does not do anything. This approach is essentially negative and self-defeating. We are to dare things for God. After all, it is just possible that the lion outside could be chained.' The subject in 14 has been dealt with at length in 2:16-22, 5:3 ff, and 7:5ff. The RSV rendering of 14b is graphic: 'he with whom the Lord is angry will fall into it'. This brings to mind Paul's solemn teaching in Romans 1:24, 26, 28. The restraints of common grace are withdrawn from those who deliberately withdraw themselves from God, and when this happens, there is no knowing how low they will sink. The theme in 15 reverts to that in 6: discipline is necessary for a child, to correct the inevitable bias towards evil. 'Rod' is not necessarily physical chastisement although this is certainly not excluded: it is the symbol of authority and power. The issue is: Who is going to rule this life, - self, or a lawfully constituted authority (in the person of father and mother)? If this flies in the face of modern psychological theory, the question is whether we follow the teaching of psychology or the teaching of the Scriptures, Well? in 16, the one course is as foolish as the other: both are precursors of want instead of solid increase (cf James 5:1 ff).

157) 22:17-21

At this point we come to another new division of the book of Proverbs. Thus far we have had, after a brief Introduction (1:1-7), a Father's Praise of Wisdom (1:8-9:18) then the Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16). Now, in 22:17-24:22, and 24:23-34, we have 'the words of the wise', in two short sections, which are followed by more Proverbs of Solomon (25:1-29:27). Words of Agur (30:1-33) and Words of King Lemuel (31:1 ff). In this new section, we return to the teaching, didactic style of chapters 1-9, with passages of several verses (e.g. 17-21) belonging together.

Kidner entitles 17-21 'The right use of Proverbs' and we could well widen this to call it 'The right use of Scripture', for the passage has much to teach about how we should read God's Word. One is reminded of John's oft-repeated words in the opening chapters of Revelation, 'He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches'. We should ask ourselves whether we use Scripture in the way advocated in 17 with alert and attentive concentration? The idea is of bending low so as not to miss the slightest whisper of the Spirit in the Word. Furthermore, not content with thus hearing it, we are to be diligent in applying mind and heart to what we hear. James echoes this in his well-known words, 'Be ye doers of the Word, not hearers only'. The message in 18 is clear and plain: the sheer joy of reading and studying God's saving and sanctifying truth. Is this how we read the Scriptures? A duty - or a pleasure? The writer has already told us (3:17) that wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace, and the Psalmist that 'At Thy right hand are pleasures for ever more'. Is this what Scripture means to us? The pleasure comes, however, through keeping the divine truth within us (18a), that is, it must be assimilated, And only thus (18b) is it ready for passing on.

158) 22:17-21

What follows in 19-21 gives some idea of the purpose of the Scriptures. In 19 this is indicated as being not merely the acquisition of knowledge, but that trust in the Lord should be deepened and enriched. This is a constant challenge: we can recall an elderly believer of whom it could be said that the words of the AV came tripping - indeed dripping - off his lips, but always there was the desolate feeling that it was like Jack Homer putting in his thumb and pulling out a plum. There was no sense of a deep or deepening fellowship with the Lord. In 20 the emphasis is on guidance and direction. 'Excellent things' in AV is rendered 'thirty sayings' in RSV, which Kidner suggests is the most probable since these 'words of the wise' can be divided into this round number of paragraphs. Either way, however, this idea of guidance by the Word is a critically important one, in the sense of allowing the principles of the Word to be built into one's spiritual make-up so that its teaching becomes 'second nature' to us. In 21 the purpose of the Scriptures is stated as being to strengthen one's grasp of the truth. One thinks of Luke's words in the Prologue to his gospel (1:4): 'the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed'. Certainty by the Word - this is a fruitful thought indeed; Not otherwise can one be a true envoy of Him who sends us forth in the service of the gospel. A man who is not sure of his message will have nothing worthwhile to say, and is very unlikely to be listened to by those to whom he speaks.

159) 22:22-28

22 and 23 belong together, and state an inalienable principle which in the strict justice of God works out repeatedly in human life. Those who oppress the afflicted and despoil them will not depart this life before they themselves suffer in the same way. God will see to this. As Kidner graphically puts it, 'To be ruthlessly "on the make" is to make, above all, an Enemy'. The theme in 24, 25 is the dangers of bad company. The point that is made is that we become like those with whom we keep company. This is of wide application, but perhaps it could be usefully applied to 'boy-girl' relationships, to give a useful and practical guideline in an area where unsuitable relationships are notoriously common. We could paraphrase the words thus: "Make no friendship with an unsuitable man (or woman), or fall into the error of convincing yourself that somehow he (or she) will become suitable, or that you will make him (or her) suitable after marriage. It never works in 26,27, the reference is once again to becoming surety, and this has been touched upon more than once in our studies, especially 6:1-5. The primary reference in 28 is to the law anent property in Deut 19:14; but the words can with real profit be applied in a general way as a warning not to sweep away old, established things, just because they are old. In this sense, it is an apt word for the young generation in whom there is an inevitable temptation to iconoclasm. In tomorrow's Note we give a comment which applies the words in a particular direction.

160) 22 28-29

H A Ironside makes the following comment on 28: "Each Israelite had received his portion directly from Jehovah Its bounds were marked out by clearly-indicated landmarks, which all were commanded to respect. He who removed them forcibly, or in secret, would have to do with God for his transgression.

In this dispensation of grace the portion of the people of God is heavenly, not earthly. Their inheritance is in the precious truth which He has committed to us. To remove the landmarks the great distinguishing doctrines of Scripture - will be to incur the divine displeasure. Yet alas; this is the wretched business in which many learned doctors and wiseacres are engaged today Nothing to sacred for their irreverent handling Precious truths like those of Atonement and Justification by Faith - yea even the mystery of the Holy Trinity arid the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ - are, in their eyes, but common things which they may dismiss or ignore as they please. But a day of reckoning is coming when God will judge them in righteousness, and when those who have been misled by their removal o:- ancient and venerable landmarks will curse them-for the loss of their souls. Terrible will be the accounting of men who while posing as instructors of the look of Christ have all the while been Satan's instruments for overthrowing the saving truths of Scripture."

In 29, the emphasis is similar to that in 21:5 (see Note for Thursday, 10th January): Thoroughness tells. A man who is diligent in business becomes a certain kind of person. Such people are of sterling value in am' society; there is something royal about them

161) 23:1-8

Here is down-to-earth grass-roots wisdom and realism indeed. The writer's gentle satire is very telling and very refreshing, as he chaffs the social climber and the would-be rich. What he is saying is; Remember your station, and do not put on airs, You do not really belong to that level of society and when you pretend you do. your background will up and betray you perhaps in a very humiliating way Paul warns us in Rom 12:3 against thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, and this is a partite laxly needful exhortation for would- be socialites, Besides the writer implies, it is rather sad to see someone setting his heart on such empty and deceptive baubles for even if they are won: and the invitation to Or at the rich man's table is given it can hardly be supposed that the rich have thereby accepted him as an equal. They of all people, are well able to see through the designs of social 'gate-crashers' and think their own thoughts (7). They are not taken in! Wealth (6) is no less elusive than social prestige and position, and just as unsatisfying and deceptive. Is it not far better to abandon, once for all, cur silly pretensions, and prefer to be real, even if our station in life is humble? The sense of relief, not to say, contentment, that would come to some people if they stopped putting on airs and pretending to be something they are not, would be immense. And, who knows, if they were content simply to be themselves at last, we might begin to find them attractive and engaging people to know, instead of, as at present, rather distasteful and - dare we suggest its - a little vulgar in their snobbish attitude.

162) 23:9-11

The proverb in 9 reminds us of Jesus' words in Matt 7:6 about casting pearls before swine. It reminds us that there are times when it is much better not to speak, and that it is wrong to continue to speak if we see that a man is trampling on the divine Word, Our Lord's attitude to Herod in Luke 23:9 is a striking example of this. For the thought in 10 see Note on 22:29. The emphasis in 11 echoes 22:22, 23. The word for 'redeemer' is 'goer, which originally means the near kinsman who by law was obliged to come to the rescue of a relative in need (the action of Boaz in the book of Ruth in illustration of this function), The thought of the fatherless having God as a near kinsman is a very beautiful and comforting one: Once again we have the emphasis on a moral order in the universe and on the idea of strict justice in God's dealings with men who transgress the laws of humanity. It is the fact that men have so substantially lost the vertical dimension in their thinking that they tend to believe that they can commit acts of social injustice with impunity. It is certainly no accident that it is in those times when a thoroughgoing supernaturalism has been recovered in the Church's testimony - bringing the vertical dimension into society - that social justice has been so substantially established, as witness the immense, compassionate social action which was a very real and practical expression of the true Christian Faith in the 19th century. It has become almost a commonplace nowadays to 'knock' the unchristian hypocrisy of the Christian Church of the Victorian era, but it is possible to do this only if one has not read and studied the evidence. The vast extent and scope of social work, touching almost every aspect of human need in the country, and laying the foundations for much of the social welfare we enjoy and take for granted today, was a direct fruit of evangelical faith.

163) 23:12-16

These verses remind us of much that was said in the opening nine chapters of the book (cf particularly 2:1-9), The note in 12 is characteristic: wisdom and instruction do not come by chance, nor fitfully either, but only when worked at with all diligence. It engages the mind, and, alas, this is something that many are unwilling to learn or understand. 'Heart' in the O.T, particularly emphasises the mind and the understanding (cf Ephes 5:17). The training of children is particularly in view in 13 ff (see Notes on 22:6, 'Train up a child...'). Children will survive correction and discipline, and indeed will survive in the best sense by means of it. But if, as Kidner points out, a parent's firmness is vital, so is the child's own choice (15,16) - therefore the parent's training must be persuasive; and where there is love and care and compassion (15b, 16a), this will surely be accomplished, even when he is administering correction. As to the spiritualising of these words, Ironside comments thus on 15 and 16: "We may hear, in these words of a father addressed to his son, the desire of our Father, God, that His children walk in the truth. It is precious indeed to be thus afforded the holy privilege of giving joy to His heart by loving wisdom and speaking right things. See 3 John 3, 4." It is surely not difficult to hear the voice of God speaking to all His children in the words this earthly father in Proverbs speaks to his son; nor should we be slow or unwilling to listen to His voice in what they say to us.

164) 23:17-25

The antidote to envy (17, 18) is to take the long view, and look at the glory, or darkness, to come. 'There is an end' in 18 has been rendered 'There is a hereafter'. The thought is that there is a time coming when present conditions shall be reversed, and righteousness shall triumph (cf Psalm 37). In contrast, 19-21 give us the short view - intemperance, 'living it up', living for the day. The true believer, however, is temperate in all things, refusing to be brought under the power of any, bringing his body into subjection. This is what 'being wise' means in 19. In 22-25 the thought complements that of 12-16. Here is true wisdom for children of all ages, and a practical exposition of the commandment 'Honour thy father and thy mother'. The exhortation to 'buy' the truth is significant (23), and reminds us of Paul's similar emphasis in Col 4:5 on redeeming the time. A price has to be paid to enable one to do this; and sometimes it costs a great deal to buy the truth and hold on to it - sometimes it costs friends, social standing, reputation, possessions, and sometimes even life itself. The 'truth' can sometimes be very costly indeed: But it is a good 'buy', and no one is ever the loser for so doing: truth never devalues, never depreciates. One senses the pulse of feeling and emotion in 24, 25, and parents today will feel in harmony with the sentiments expressed, in view of the problems of bringing up young people in a world such as ours. For a son or daughter to grow up 'righteous' is an inestimable boon. Yet we ought not to fear for them in any craven spirit: the promises are sure, and children are the heritage of the Lord.

165) 23:26-35

26 is the only effective antidote to 27 and 28. Here it is both the earthly father, and God, speaking, the One through the other, for the father is in the place of God to his child. 27 and 28 demythologise the romanticism of unchastity. Is there not an urgent need for this demythologising today, when unchastity is held up to be so attractive, so right, so natural, when emotional feeling is made and allowed to overthrow all sense of honour, decency and justice. It is time that the harsh and brutal realism of these verses was brought to the forefront of people's thinking, and that a squalid and ugly thing was called by its proper name.

29-35 deal with another open sore on the body of society today. Six questions in 29 are answered in the verses that follow. One has only to read these questions and answers to realise the enormity of the tragedy and horror of drunkenness in the life of man, and to see the obscenity of the advertisements blazoned by the drink trade on the mass media. When one thinks of the pressure of psychological advertisement, and the groove that constant repetition makes in a man's mind, one realises that the power of such techniques is incalculable. The I R A may have killed their hundreds in Ulster, but the brewers have a far greater toll of guilt upon them, for the countless numbers of lives ruined - and homes and families - and children growing up into psychological misfits. Have we any conception of the terrible thing that is being done in society? The alcoholism clinics, the divorce courts the social service departments of our local councils could tell us the answer: in terms of sheer human misery and brokenness. It is always at the end of the line, and with the end-product of the process, that one sees the real issues, and society needs to look there much oftener than it does.

166) 24:1-6

The thought in 1,2 is similar to that in 23:17 (see Note). There, the long-term view was advocated, but here we have a close-up view: and from it we see that the so-called attraction of the evil life is a very negative thing. By contrast, we see in 3 and 4 the godly alternative. The seeming - and even the real, worldly - advantages of evil men are not to be compared with the solid joys and lasting pleasures of Zion's children. This building process can be applied literally to house building (cf Christ's parable in Matt 7) or perhaps more probably metaphorically -to the building of a family, or of character, or of anything of lasting worth, As Ironside says 'Storing the mind with wisdom, knowledge and understanding, is like building a mansion on a solid foundation, and beautifying and enriching it with costly treasures that gratify the beholder, and add to the enjoyment of the occupants. He can never be poor who has the wisdom that cometh down from above. See James 3:17, 18.' 5 and 6 follow in thought from 3 and 4, and echo a note already struck, in 11:14 and 20:18. A man who is wise is not above asking and heeding the advice of other wise men. It is the man who is lacking in wisdom that thinks he can dispense with the multitude of counsellors that can give him a true direction in the way he takes. 'Make thy war' in 6 is evidently 'make successful war' and may be taken in general terms to denote a prosperous issue in what we are engaged in.

167) 24:7-12

Kidner takes '1 as indicating that 'issues of any gravity (cf 5, 6) quickly show up the trifler' and gives the verse the title 'a fool out of his element'. 7b can mean either (i) that he has nothing to say in the sense of contributing usefully to the situation, or (ii) that he will have nothing to say when he comes up for judgment ('gate' here refers to the place of judgments where the elders sat to pronounce on cases) In 8 and 9 the idea of plotting and scheming is prominent. Thoughts as well as words and deeds shall be judged when the secrets of men are laid bare. A contrast is intended between the wise in 3-6 and the foolish in 7-9 as if the writer were holding both up to our gaze bidding us take a good look at them and make a proper choice. We should notice the statement in 9b - the scoffer is an abomination to men as well as to God - this is a reminder that public opinion will in the end redress the balance and rule his behaviour out of court. We may link the message of 10-12 to what has gone before in 3ff: it is the wise man who proves to be strong, for wisdom makes for strength. This, we may say, is the whole point and purpose of a true biblical ministry - to create the kind of character that will stand in the evil day, and having done all, stands This has been the salvation of the weak down the ages - their willingness and determination to expose themselves to the disciplines of the divine Word even if it breaks them in the process, in order to allow it to shape and fashion them into durable and stable characters that will not faint in the day of adversity (10) that will not allow them to excuse themselves from the acceptance of difficult and arduous stewardships in the gospel (11), or plead ignorance in face of them (12) Compare Jer 12:5 for a similar emphasis.

168) 24:13-16

The meaning in 13 and 14 is that as honey is sweet to the taste so is the acquisition of wisdom to the souls. We need to relate this to the general over-all theme of the production of wisdom through the ministry of the Word, in terms of character-formation. Once we attain this (it is always only an approximation, a relative attainment) the rewards are sure, because we become a certain kind of person, rich in the things that matter, stable and established in the truth. In 15 and 16 the warning is against kicking a man when he is down: from the merely prudential viewpoint it is not safe to do so, for he is likely to get up again and deal with his b flying assailant! But there is a deeper thought here also. The question arises as to what we do when we fall. Do we become discouraged, or grit our teeth and struggle to our feet again? The one fatal attitude is to lose heart. The falling in one sense is not so important; provided we get up again. The habit of getting up makes, as it were, a gracious groove in our minds, and one day we shall find that that habit will not only prop us up but keep us up. C.S. Lewis has a fine word about this: "I know all about the despair of overcoming chronic temptations. It is not serious, provided self-offended petulance, annoyance at breaking records; impatience, etc. don't get the upper hand. No amount of falls will really undo us if we keep on picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home. But the bathrooms are all ready, the towels put out and the clean clothes in the airing cupboard. It is when we notice the dirt that God is most present in us: it is the very sign of His presence."

169) 24:17-22

There is more in 17 and 18 about falling, and the general theme of the previous verses is continued, this time however with a warning not to gloat over one's enemy when he falls. We see the closeness of spirit these verses share with the New Testament when we compare them with, e. g. Romans 11:18-21, 12:20 21, and 1 Cor 13:6a, which Moffatt renders 'Love is never glad when others go wrong'. The gloating may be more reprehensible in the sight of God than the enemy's guilt. The note struck in 19, 20 repeats the theme of 24:1 (see Note) The words breathe a faith and trust in the divine sovereignty, which is the true source of peace in the midst of the injustices of life The emphasis in 21 runs uniformly through the New Testament and both Paul and Peter stand firmly on this position (cf 1 Pet 2:13ff and Rom 13:1-7) To meddle with those given to change' would be to associate with or assist men who by rebellion and intrigue disturb the peace and order of society. Such should be given a wide berth. We wonder how many starry-eyed idealists have been beguiled into violence and revolution through ignorance of the teaching that such Scriptures give. A healthy respect for law and order is something our society is in sore need of today. The RSV takes 21b to mean 'do not disobey either of them', following the Greek rather than the Hebrew. The resultant translation reads more clearly (but also more generally) than the AV Either way, however, the message is clear and plain: the Scriptures give absolute precedence to law and order over revolution and chaos, and we cannot get away from this without 'wresting them to our own destruction', The only revolution that the Christian is permitted to become involved in is the revolution of love: and the weapons of this warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, They should be tried!

170) 24:23-26

We come to further 'words of the wise' in these verses. They deal with four subjects, the first of which (24-26) relates to respect of persons and straight speaking. The point about saying to the wicked 'Thou art righteous' can only be that there is some ulterior motive in doing so - e.g. flattery with a view to winning favour. This shows how basic integrity can be compromised by matters of expediency. On the other hand, forthrightness and straightness of speaking, even if costly, will win respect and esteem from right-thinking people and receive their blessings. The Apostle James takes up this theme in his epistle (2:1-12), and his words should be studied along with these. It should hardly need saying, however, that there is no warrant here for the 'hob-nailed' frankness that some people pride themselves in having, when they 'speak their minds' with the most blatant insensitivity and hurtfulness. Of all insensitive people; they are the most insensitive and most brutish; but this is a far cry from the straight honesty and integrity advocated here that is not prepared, for peace's sake or out of fear or cowardice, to remain silent when a rebuke is called for.

171) 24:27

The second subject '27) has to do with laying foundations. One thinks of Jesus' words in Luke 14:28-30 about the man who began to build and was not able to finish. It is the part of wisdom to count the cost, lest the undertaking be too great, and prove a monument of folly in the ends Kidner takes the verse differently: "The house building probably means the founding of a family (cf 14:1): a matter that must wait its turn till afterwards, As in a rural economy, well-worked fields justify and nourish the farmhouse; so a well-ordered life (in things material and immaterial) should be established before marriage.' There is much wisdom in these words, as they underline the improvidence; impracticality and potential for breakdown that lie in marriage that is entered into without adequate provision. There is nothing so calculated to wear thin the mere romance of human association as lack of hard cash over a period of time. They have also something pointed to say with regard to immaterial considerations. It is dangerous to assume that marriage solves emotional problems and difficulties. Experience teaches on the contrary that it often accentuates and intensifies them. This is to look for something in marriage that it was never designed to give or provide. A man needs to get himself sorted out first of all, before he can make much of a success in marriage. There is something else also, with regard to spiritual issues. It takes time to have Christ established as Lord of life, and undisputed Ruler. All too often, the edge is lost from one's spiritual life through not having given time to get Christ truly and unalterably installed as King in the heart.

172) 24:28-34

The next subject is prejudiced witness. 28 and 29 are linked. The action that is deplored in 28 is clearly an act of revenge, as 29 indicates. And it is forbidden (see 20:22, also Rom 12:19). We are not to allow others' attitudes to us to condition and determine our attitude to them. We can safely leave our cause in God's hands. He is just, and will look after our interests. We may be content in the knowledge that His will is being carried out, despite all efforts of the enemy to thwart it. Joseph's words, 'God meant it unto good' illustrate this well. The divine perspective helped him to victory here, and so it may do for us also.

The sluggard occupies the remaining verses of the chapter (see 6:6-11, and Note for September 19th, 1973). Kidner has a trenchant comment: 'The sluggard is no freak: but, as often as not, an ordinary man who has made too many excuses, too many refusals, and too many postponements. It has all been as imperceptible, and as pleasant, as falling asleep'. The point in 30 is well made: we are to look at the fruits of a man's performance, of his way of life, and see what he has accomplished. This is the test. By this we shall be justified or condemned. If one lesson stands out in all this, it is that of the interaction and balance between faith and effort. Faith, and the rest of faith, have little in common with idleness, lack of application and lack of a sense of responsibility, Faith and a sense of responsibility belong together, and what God has joined together no man must put asunder. If a man is lacking in a sense of responsibility, he is in that measure lacking in faith, and needs to understand this. God helps those who help themselves - this is a thoroughly biblical position. It in no wise militates against the true life of faith, indeed, on the contrary, it is the full flowering and fruitage of faith to live with a true sense of responsibility.

173) 25:1-5

This chapter brings us to a further collection of Solomon's proverbs, compiled as we are told in 1 by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah. This in itself presents an interesting point. Hezekiah belonged to a period more than 200 years after Solomon (Solomon died in 931 BC, and Hezekiah came to the throne in 727 BC). It is something when a man's words are felt to be worth republishing more than 200 years after his death! One wonders whether the men of Hezekiah really knew just how important a thing they were doing when they copied out Solomon's wisdom. Doubtless they were thinking of their own day: they could not have known that they were doing something that would bless many future generations down the stream of time. 'Mystery in God and man' seems to be the theme of 2-6. 2a speaks of the inscrutability of God (cf Deut 29:29. Rom 11:33.34). The 'secret things belong unto the Lord our God's. But there are two possible attitudes to this, one is that of exasperation and resentment (as e.g. to the doctrines of predestination); the other is that of worship and adoration. It puts us in our proper place. In 2b, what is in view is not so much academic research, as administrative probes as Kidner puts it: the king should know what is going on. It is his job also as ruler and judge, to get to the bottom of things, to see that justice is done. This seems to be the force of 4 and 5: it is necessary to sift things and people separating the evil from the good and so exposing it and dealing with it, in order to preserve society from corruption. Dross is degrading whether in metal or in politics!

174) 25:6-13

In 6 and 7 we have the social climber once again (cf 23:1 ff and Note) Jesus uses the saying in 7 in Luke 14:7-11. and Paul has the same kind of thought in Rom 12:3; which JB Phillips translates 'Don't cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your importance', The RSV takes 7c with 8, 'What your eyes have seen do not bring hastily into court' The meaning is that we do not always know all the facts of a situation and therefore are seldom able to judge correctly. We may live to regret our hasty drawing of conclusions about the particular piece of hearsay we have passed on! The best advice is in 9 - Go to the fountain head It is so difficult to get the real facts second hand. or to interpret them properly Also, as Kidner penetratingly points out one's motives in spreading a story are seldom as pure as one pretends:" One is reminded of Alexander Whyte's dictum: 'Is it true? Is it kind to repeat it? Is it necessary to repeat it?' To become known as someone who has a tendency to gossip and not trustworthy with confidences given, is an awful blight and indictment! The theme in 11 and 12 is apt words (cf 24:26). Kidner refers 11a back to 9, the direct approach. This is salutary. So often the man who 'speaks his mind' is like a bull in a china shop for sensitivity: Right words spoken at the proper time - this seems to be the meaning of the metaphor a kind of 'still-life' picture which can sometimes be extraordinarily eloquent and living. The metaphor continues in 12, and suggests that reproof, far from harming its recipient, will actually adorn him, when it is rightly received. In 13 our modern equivalent would be something like iced drinks on a hot afternoon in the cornfield. We should note particularly what is being said here, however: it is not those to whom the faithful messenger is sent, but those who send him, who are refreshed and blest. When this is applied spiritually, it underlines an important lesson. Faithfulness in gospel work is a refreshment of spirit to God. The Pauline phrase, 'a sweet-smelling savour to God' is the New Testament equivalent,

175) 25:14-20

The theme in 14 is that of promises not kept, The RSV's 'man who boasts of a gift he does not give' is an eloquent translation. It is when we promise God our loyalty and our love and our substance and withhold it, that spiritual abortion takes place. Kidner's comment on 15 could hardly be bettered: 'The quality that is praised is a refusal to be provoked, and the point is that so unassuming a weapon may win surprising victories'. In 16 one commentator suggests that 'honey' stands here as the symbol of natural gifts and blessings: which God has given us richly to enjoy. We must not be brought under the power of any of them, however, as Paul points out in 1 Cor 6:12. God's gifts are for use, not abuse; and when inordinate desire for however legitimate an object lays hold upon men, trouble always ensues. A parallel idea is expressed in 17, the connecting link being the word 'filled' (the AV marginal reading in 17 for 'weary'), How prone we are to take advantage of others' goodness of heart! Our writer is very 'down-to-earth' in his observations of life: In 18 bearing false witness is shown as the deadly dangerous thing it really is; the metaphors used give some indication of just how much and how many different kinds of damage can be done. The continual, nagging pain that a broken tooth gives is an apt metaphor to describe the hurt one experiences when a trust has been betrayed. The metaphors in 20 are very graphic, especially the second one, vinegar on nitre (or soda), The effect of the acid on the alkali is to make it fizz, and this is precisely the effect of heartless, superficial jollity on a sorrowful, broken heart, It is true that some who are sorry for themselves need to be laughed out of their self-pity; but real sorrow needs compassion and understanding, How needful, therefore, to have discernment to distinguish the two!

176) 25:21-26

There is nothing finer in relation to New Testament ethics in the whole of the Old Testament than the thought expressed in 21 and 22, 'Coals of fire' represent, as Kidner puts it, 'the pangs which are far better felt now as shame than later as punishment'. And, of course, the effect of disinterested love is so often to make people ashamed of themselves; and if it burns deeply enough, it will lead to repentance. The AV and RSV renderings of 23 are opposite to one another, but paradoxically the meaning is much the same in both cases. If we follow the AV, the meaning would be that an angry countenance drives away a backbiting tongue in the sense that the backbiting arouses righteous indignation. When the fire of divine anger glints in a holy man's eyes it is enough to make any backbiting tongue stop wagging, and turn away its owner in discomfiture. If we follow the RSV, the meaning would be that a backbiting tongue brings forth art; looks - again the idea of righteous indignation is present as in AV, 24 repeats an earlier verse, 21:9, which gives the choice between ignominious solitude or intolerable society (Kidner). A wonderful gospel message can be preached from 25, and one inevitably thinks of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria; as He spoke to that thirsty soul about living water from a far country. The message in 26 is about the danger and evil of compromise. A good and righteous man has a reputation, people look up to him: his fall therefore imperils the many who have learned to rely on him and look up to him. The more there are who drink at that fountain, the more will be infected and harmed when it becomes troubled and corrupt. What a spur this should be to those in the public eye to remember that no man lives unto himself.

177) 25:27-28

The translation of 27 is problematic, and neither the AV nor the RSV is satisfactory. The NEB has 'A surfeit of honey is bad for a man, and the quest for honour is burdensome', The verse may simply re-emphasise the thought in 6 in its warning against giving oneself airs and seeking place, and that in 16 about becoming inordinately concerned about things that are good only when kept in their place. It is not wrong, for example, to want to better oneself, or to attain a higher standard of living, but if this becomes our all-consuming aim in life, to the exclusion of all else, we had better beware, for we are on dangerous ground. The penetrating observation in 28 serves as a telling commentary on 27. The man who cannot exercise self-control, in eating his particular 'honey', is like a city without defences. When he has no rule over his own spirit, he becomes victim of these inordinate desires, which attack him as an enemy attacks a city under siege, and he crumples under the impact. Ironside comments: "May we have grace given to hold our spirits in godly subjection, that thus we become not like a city exposed to the ready assaults of its enemies! Even when one is clearly in the right, nothing so prejudices his case as losing control of his temper and uttering heated hasty words. Others are prone to forget the minor points of the evidence at such a time, and to judge by the spirit manifested, Therefore the importance of exemplifying in our words and ways 'the meekness and gentleness of Christ'"

178) 26:1-3

Unlike the previous chapter, which strung together a number of relatively unconnected gems of wisdom this one has a much more- unified theme, dealing in turn with three kindred spirits: the fool (1 -12), the sluggard (13-16) and the mischief-maker (17-28). The metaphor in 1 has a twofold thrust: one idea is that of incongruity It is incongruous for a fool to be honoured; he is not the size for honour One thinks of the adulation of worthless characters and their recognition in the Honours lists, and could wish for a more biblical approach in the awarding of the M.B.E.' The other idea is the damage it can do Rain can ruin a harvest, and giving honour to these unworthy of it demeans the honour and does harm to society's. The operative word in 2 is 'causeless' A curse uttered without cause is like the random flight of these birds: it will not light on its intended target. As Bridges puts it. 'Under this harmless shower of stones we turn from men to God and are at peace'. But there ????!??...!eL and we do well to remember that there can, be real power from the evil one in them, as missionaries will confirm. Two things need to be said here: one it that we ought to keep well clear of those who dabble with dark spiritist powers; the other is that was mutt learn the power of the name of Jesus for to speak that name against the darkest curse on earth is to prevail. For the thought in 3, see Psalm 32:9 which makes it clear that the thought here is that of discipline rather than retribution in-punishment, for one does not normally punish these animals when using the bit or the bridle. The fool is either too lethargic, or too headstrong and therefore needs the whip to stir-him or the bit to restrain him. Far better to be obedient, and se avoid the 'bit-and-bridle' guidance!

¹ Text unreadable see Reading for January 1974

179) 26:4-10

The contradiction in 4 and 5 is only seeming: it bears witness to the dilemma we are placed in by the fool. To answer him is almost to lower oneself to his level; not to answer him is to do harm to the fool who needs correction. 'Cutteth off' in 6 corresponds to our modern idiom, 'takes the feet from^o'. The meaning is that to send a message by a fool makes pretty sure that it will not get there, and if so, damage will be done. The RSV translates 7 'Like a lame man's legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools'. The idea is that the legs promise much, but fulfil little - promises of action which do not lead to anything. It is the kind of proverb which is echoed in our modern saying, 'He does not fly every time he flaps his wings'. Two possible meanings can be given to 8. One is to take 'bind' in the sense of tying the stone into the sling. This would be to stultify the whole point of the exercise for the stone is there to be slung out. The message, then, is that of incongruity. The other meaning is that you never know (unless you are an expert) where the stone is going to land, and if you honour a fool, you do not know what he will do next. A thorn-branch in the hand of a drunkard (9) is almost certain to prove harmful to himself and to others, and the same is true when a fool sets up to teach. He is like to destroy himself and those who heed him. The scholars tell us that the original text of 10 is very uncertain, and a comparison of RSV and AV will show how differently it has been construed. The AV makes sense as it reads, and gives its own solemn message about the certainty of judgment on fools and transgressors. If we follow the RSV, the meaning will be that a fool and a drunkard make equally poor employees, the one being as bad and useless as the other.

180) 26:11-13

The Apostle Peter takes up the words of 11 in his second epistle (2:22), and the point that both verses make is a twofold one: on the one hand, the reversion to folly exposes what the man really is at heart. The fool gives himself away; on the other hand, to go back means that a man can hardly plead either ignorance or weakness: perversity is also involved. In 12 we have the first comforting thing said about the fool in the whole book! Here is someone worse than a fool, in the sense that a fool may perchance at last learn some sense from all the misfortunes that befall him, whereas a man wise in his own conceits, with exaggerated ideas of his own importance, places himself, by his very assumption of superiority, beyond the reach of help. In 13-16 we have the sluggard again. Here is another man who does not see himself as he really is. The keynote throughout is rationalisation. He does not see himself as a sluggard, he always has the perfect, plausible excuse. The issue in 13 for all of us is the conflict between duty and inclination. If we are, at heart, and secretly, lazy, it is astonishing how plausibly we shall be able to circumvent our plain duty, by introducing what we regard as 'realistic' considerations which militate against our doing it, We can always find an excuse for avoiding something we do not really want to do, even though it is our obvious duty. The amusing picture in 14 of the door swinging on its hinge has its serious point, which is that, although in constant movement, it never gets anywhere. The illusion of movement and activity without ever getting out of the bit often conceals a basic laziness. This man (15) is too lazy even to eat his food: as Kidner puts it, the rare effort of beginning his meal has been too much for him, and it goes cold on him. As for excuses and rationalisations (16), he is a past-master in the art. One has only to make the effort to help such a man to get a job to find this out. The plausible arguments he uses to explain to us why the job is not suitable are so astute that they almost earn him his social security payments for ingenuity and cleverness!

181) 26:17-22

The remainder of the chapter deals with mischief-makers and mischief-making. In 17, the warning is very plain: to interfere in a quarrel, unless one has been appealed to by one or other of the participants is to ask for trouble. Moses' experience in Exo. 2:13, 14, is a telling example of how true these words are. Even more solemn is the warning in 18 and 19: a misplaced sense of humour can be a terrible hazard, and the harm and hurt it can often cause is in no wise excused or healed by the words 'I was only joking'. A sense of humour is one thing, but when it is exercised at the expense of tears and hurt in other people, it is something just not permitted for those who would walk with God. Some people - and alas, some Christians too - have a perverse, even sadistic, sense of humour that delights in doing and saying things that cause embarrassment and distress. Sadly enough, they generally succeed in their aim, Do they see themselves mirrored in these verses? In 20 and 21, want of fuel is the thing greatly to be desired. So far as gossip is concerned, "passing it on" (a) makes you a tale-bearer, even if you tell only one person, and do it only once; and (b) feeds the fire. You could have put it out, but did not! There is something in a contentious (quarrelsome RSV) man that is combustible, He simply needs to be there, in the company, and there is sure to be fire. 22 repeats 18:8, and RSV's 'delicious morsels' instead of 'wounds' is a more likely translation. The meaning is that passing on titbits of gossip, though enjoyable for those who do so and those who receive them, is harmful to the soul.

182) 26:23-28

For 'silver dross' in 23 the RSV reads 'glaze', and this serves to highlight the point that is being made, viz. that a smooth and polished exterior may often conceal a rough and base interior. 24-26 are intended as comments on this statement. A man may speak smoothly, but his heart may be rotten, Sooner or later such a man is found out, One only needs to scratch a glazed vessel to find the earthenware underneath, and a smooth polish in outward demeanour is often easily scratched, 'Burning lips' may refer to fervent protestations of love that are empty of reality and may conceal very different emotions. Ironside comments, "His burning words are only uttered to cover the corruption of his purposes, Hating the object of his attentions, he will endeavour to deceive by fair speech, but his heart is full of abominations, and he is not to be trusted He endeavours to cover his malice by falsehood, and for a time may succeed, but eventually his true character shall be manifested openly:" 27 and 28 seem linked with the previous verses: such basic insincerity will ultimately recoil on those guilty of it., There is a grim justice in God that makes this inevitable. Would that we were always kept aware of this, for such an awareness would lay restraint upon us for very fear; and once restrained, we might be able to see the nature of the temptation clearly enough to learn to hate it, and so turn permanently from such evil ways. Of 28, Ironside says , "Conscious of having wronged another and being determined not to confess it., the dissembler will store his heart with hatred against the object of his wrongdoing, He who has debtors may graciously forgive them; but he who is in debt is very apt to cherish the bitterest animosity against the one from whom he has borrowed. One may readily overlook an injury, while he who has done another a favour will often be hated for his kindness, and be added to displeasure."

183) 27:1-4

The Apostle James takes up the proverb in 1 in his epistle (4:13-16) and makes pointed application and expansion of it. The meaning is: Tomorrow is not ours, God gives us today, and we must work today with all our might: The real commentary here is the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12). In all this roan did. God was left out of the reckoning. He kept on saying `Tomorrow', but God finally said, 'No, tonight': Life must be lived in all things with reference to God and to His will: From boasting of tomorrow, the writer turns to the danger of boasting of oneself. Self praise, as we say, is no honour. But it is often when the other man's (legitimate) praise is withheld that self-praise becomes a temptation (cf 1 Pet 2:17, Rom 13:7, where the apostles insist that honour should be given where honour is due). If this be so how do we apportion blame for the sin of self-praise; and is more blameworthy, the man who commits it or the man who causes it? This is worth thinking about. Of 3 one commentator writes, "It is because of its unreasonableness that a fool's wrath is so heavy He will listen to no explanations, and will view with malice and suspicion all attempts to appease him Better far to leave such a man to himself than to strive with him, for he is incapable of sound judgment" (Ironsides) Envy in 4 can be taken in two ways: if it is the bad and unhealthy emotion the message of the verse is: wrath subsides, but jealousy goes on and on (think of Joseph's brethren in Gen 37!). If, however, it is, as Kidner suggests, a proper intolerance of disruptive intrusion (cf 6:32-35), it is a mark of love as opposed to indifference, and therefore a very dangerous emotion for an evildoer to encounter.

184) 27:5-9

5 and 6 refer to the desirability of frankness between friends. 'Love that is hidden' (or 'love that conceals') means a love that never rebukes, and is therefore morally valueless (Kidner). It is a duty of friendship to fulfil this kind of ministry, and the wounds that such friendship will sometimes make have healing in them. If you really love, you have earned the right to be frank with your friend. This is seen very clearly in a true husband/wife relationship. A wife may often be her husband's severest critic - and after he has got over the pricking of the bubble of his conceit, he will learn to appreciate really constructive criticism. This is the function of a 'help-meet', and this, alas, is often where failure is often manifest. Sometimes, by worshipping her man instead of loving him she fails him in his best interests. She can see no fault in him. If she had loved him more and worshipped him less, she might have made a man of him. The question posed by 7 is, "How hungry are we for spiritual things?" It is easy to become used to rich food and become faddy. Some people do not learn to appreciate spiritual ministry until they have been removed far from it. In 8 the idea is of a charge that has been deserted, a stewardship that has been abandoned. To every man his work and his place; and we must beware of discontent with either work or place that God has given, for this leads to 'out-of-joint'-ness. Are we where we should be, or have we strayed from the place God put us? We should follow the AV rather than the RSV in 9. The meaning is that loving, solicitous counsel on the part of a true friend is as refreshing and stimulating to the soul as oil and perfume to the body (cf David and Jonathan). How much more so when that friend is Christ: (cf Psalm 23:3, 5).

185) 27:10-17

The question that arises in 10 is whether a contrast is being made between a close friend who is all compassion (the sort of person we would instinctively turn to in time of trouble) and a brother who is lacking in the milk of human kindness, or a simple statement that the worth of tested family friends is equivalent to that of a brother. Either way, there is valuable truth here. The thought in 11 is the same as that in 10:1 - 'a wise son maketh a glad father'. If we apply the verse as the voice of God speaking to his sons by faith in Christ Jesus, it becomes very illuminating. It is wonderful to think that it is in our power to gladden the heart of God by the way we live (cf Job 1/2) 12 repeats 22:3 (see Note for Wed. 16th January), while 13 practically repeats 20:16. Lack of tact, or sensibility, is what is in view in 14, and the emphasis is similar to that in 25:20 (see Note for Friday 8th January). 15 and 16 echo 19:13 and 21:9, 19. The graphic metaphor in 16 means that in a contentious woman one is dealing with someone as unsteady as the wind and as slippery as oil. It is impossible to tie such a person down (Kidner). What is a man to do, then? Well, nothing can be done if he has married such an one. This propensity would have needed to be discovered before marriage! The message, then, is, 'If you see this, give her a wide berth. Any relationship entered into against your better judgment is sure to come to grief. Don't deceive yourself into believing she will change later,' Far better to have a relationship where there can be a profitable exchange of thought and ideas, such as is indicated in 17. Some people act like catalysts on others, and this is as true within the marriage bond as in friendship in general.

186) 27:18-22

Fidelity, says 18, assures its own reward in due course, even if it be not honour as the world counts honour. This is true on both the human and divine levels. Jesus said, 'Your Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward you openly' (Matt 6:4). 19 is a curious verse. The metaphor in the first part of the verse is not in doubt: clear water is perhaps the most primitive of all mirrors. The second part however, can be taken in more than one way, as a comparison of the AV and the RSV indicates. The latter takes it a man need only look within to see himself, while the former takes it to mean that one man's heart answers to another. As Kidner puts it, 'your fellow man confronts you with the shape in which thoughts and habits like your own have grouped themselves into a character.' Either way, a telling challenge is presented that we do well to heed. One of the things 20 can mean is that there is such a thing as wrong desire, and it is the essence of a wrong desire that it can never be satisfied. The whole universe could be poured into the throat of that desire, and it will crave for still more. It is, in the truest sense of the term, a bottomless pit. It is one thing to yearn for friendship, or sympathy this is part of our human nature; but the desire can become cankered and diseased so extensively that we can come to this position. When we do there is only one answer: not control, but crucifixion, is needed, 21 and 22 describe different kinds of testing. In 21, we are told that praise may prove to be a fiery crucible for a man to pass through, and not all can stand it. Many who have prospered in adversity have failed grievously in prosperity (cf 1 Sam 18:7 for two different reactions in this crucible), On the other hand, in 22, the fool can go through the severest of tests without being purified or having the chaff sifted from his life, if his folly has become part of him, If this word underlines for us that whatever becomes part of us (whether folly or wisdom) through long association with it, will remain inalienably ours, it will have taught us a solemn and fundamental lesson about life. The choice is ours.

187) 27:23-27

On the natural level, what is advocated in this passage (entitled by Kidner 'Pastoral Symphony') is the integrity of work well done, and done for its own sake, not 'with a view'. Quality tells, in work, and will he ultimately be blessed. Kidner adds that the passage 'recalls the reader from the scramble for money and position (24) to the satisfaction of doing a worthwhile job well (23), and to a recognition of the rhythm (25) and sufficiency (26, 27) of God's care.' This poses a very practical and important question: What is the basis on which we finally decide which job in life to choose? Is the question. What will it bring in, in terms of cash or status? Is that the criterion? Or, do we ask, Is this a worthwhile career, will there be fulfilment in it? The whole emphasis in contemporary society is on the former rather than on the latter. It is sad and disquieting to see a man opting for a job with the big salary simply because it has a big salary, It does not seem to matter that it is a meretricious job, so long as the money is good. This is a kind of prostitution - the prostitution of work and the prostitution of men also. It is very ugly. There would assuredly be more contentment and fulfilment in society today if such an attitude were flushed out of our system, and integrity took its place. For a spiritual application of these verses, see 1 Peter 5:1-4, Faithfulness and integrity in spiritual ministry will bring their own reward also; they can never be taken for granted.

188) 28:1-3

The first verse speaks of the effect of sin on the conscience. As Shakespeare puts it 'Conscience doth make cowards of us all'. The power of a bad conscience can be very great indeed. Conversely, righteousness makes men bold, in the sense of being confident. This might be some indication of the real source of what we sometimes call the unction of the Lord. When a man's life is right with the Lord, it carries with it something of the divine authority which cannot be gainsaid, even if bitterly disagreed with. In 2, we have a word about the effect of rebellion and revolution (this is the sense of the word 'transgression'). Kidner refers to the quick succession of evil rulers in Israel, after the death of Solomon, almost all of them being despatched by assassination, whereas Judah had comparative stability (RSV's word for 'state' in AV). Ironside comments: When a people refuse to own the powers that be as ordained of God they are likely, in a disrupted state of society, to be exposed to the evil machinations of various leaders, each one jealous of the other, hence their princes or rulers are many, and continually changing. One could wish that those who are so keen on revolution in society would recognise that when they once initiate a revolutionary idea or spirit, they have tampered with a power that straightway goes outwith their control, and that even though they succeed in establishing their revolution, they themselves may well be the next victims. In this connection what is said in 3 is very apposite: look what the dictatorship of the proletariat has done to Russia. Freakish rain brings havoc instead of blessing, and if a dictatorship of the right is replaced by a dictatorship of the left, then the rain that was meant to bring refreshment and renewal can be ruinous. Too much rain makes everything drab!

189) 28:4 8

Kidner has a trenchant comment on 4a: "Without revelation all is soon relative; and with moral relativity, nothing quite merits attack. So e.g. the tyrant is accepted because he gets things done, and the pervert, because his condition is interesting. The full sequence appears in Romans 1:18-32." The meaning of lb is that keeping the law strikes a blow for righteousness against evil. There is more on this subject in 6. Judgment here means justice. Evil men just do not understand how absolutely integral to the very structure of the universe justice is. The closer we are to God, however, the more they see this, and therefore the more they will reverence justice. This is why true spirituality is a good quality for public life. This is put in another way in 6: it is moral worth, and the quality of integrity in life, that always tells ultimately in society. And, since the life of society ultimately depends on family life (7), it is in the family that such integrity must first be nurtured. Hence the emphasis on keeping the law. This is not to be confused with legalism: there is a legalistic keeping of the law that leads to bondage, but it was, after all, Jesus Who said, 'If ye love Me, keep my commandments'. The word about 'usury' in 8 is full of interest and instruction. The O T is quite explicit in its teaching on this matter: it does not condemn the principle of lending money for interest as such - in modern life our whole economic system is based upon it but it does speak against the heartlessness of making your brother pay interest on your loan to him. As Kidner succinctly puts it "What is quite proper in terms of economics (Deut 23:20) is pronounced improper in terms of family care (Deut 23:19) - as if a doctor should charge for treating his own children. Mercy and compassion are to be the keynotes, and the moral, in general terms, is: Don't drive a hard bargain with the poor, it is heartless to do so

190) 28:9 14

In 9, the writer goes even further than the Psalmist in Ps 66:18. Not only will prayer not be heard, it will be an abomination to the Lord. i.e. His anger will be kindled. It is hardly possible to read 10 without thinking of our Lord's words in Matt 18:6, Scripture makes a distinction between those who are beguiled into evil and those who beguile them, and it is the latter that God has a special interest in, It would be interesting to compute what happens ultimately to such people. One thing is sure: God does not let them go unpunished. He will not hold them guilt less for having led others astray. The goodly inheritance (RSV) that the upright have is the joy of leading others in the right way, As Daniel puts it, they that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars for ever. What is in view in 11 is the fallacy of supposing that the mere possession of money confers status or stature of any kind. So often, such people are seen through in their pathetic pretensions, 12 echoes a thought expressed in 11:10, on which Kidner comments, "However drab the world makes out virtue to be. it appreciates the boon of it in public life" There is no doubt that the presence of righteous men in public life is good for society. The meaning of 'hidden' is uncertain. One suggestion is that men hide themselves for fear of reprisals, another is that they do so in the recognition that it may not be the time as yet to declare themselves, and that they can bide their time. For the thought in 13, see Psalm 32:1-4, also 1 John 1:6-9. There are different ways of covering sin - by pretending it is not there, for example, or by assuming that the mere passage of time will wipe it away. The real meaning of 'confession is saying the same thing as'. To confess our sin is to say the same thing about it as God says, and to call it what He calls it. Not until we are as frank as this is true confession made and pardon received. 14 seems a variation of 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', and follows well upon 13, because when we get right with God a new, healthy fear of Him, coupled with a fear of sinning, takes over in our hearts; and that is as it should be.

191) 28:15-20

The picture in 15 and 16 of lawless rule is graphic and to the point and, for the oppressed, reassuring for, ruthless and merciless as it is, it promises to be short-lived, as 16b implies. The RSV rendering of 17, 'He that is burdened with the blood of another' makes the meaning clearer than AV, as referring to one who has committed a crime. We may think the injunction 'let no man help him (RSV)' heartless and scarcely in line with New Testament ethics, but this would be to misunderstand what is being said. The context is law and order, and the meaning is that we must not interfere with the course of justice. To help a murderer is to become an accessory after the fact, and this inevitably brings punishment. There is no doctrine of salvation by works in 18; rather, the reference is to the believer's walk. The meaning is that he will be delivered from much that he would otherwise have to endure if he took his own way. To follow one's own way is to court disaster, and some people have to learn this the hard way. The emphasis in 19 is on the reward of diligence. Hard work is a necessary ingredient of real success. Since this is so, it is silly of believers to imagine there can be any short cut to integrity and maturity in Christian character. We today are far more prone to think like this than an older generation, bred on Christian ethics, was wont to do. It is the philosophy of the world, not of the Christian faith - get rich quick, get on quick, short cuts to everything, instant success, like instant coffee. This attitude is being absorbed into the thinking of Christian people, with disastrous effects. One of these results is underlined in 20b, in relation to money. There are unhallowed, carnal desires for 'getting on' which are simply wrong and sinful, not to say illegal or criminal; and once on to the band-wagon and into the rat-race, a momentum develops that could lead to ruin.

192) 28:21-28

The need for integrity is still in view in 21. For as petty a thing as a piece of bread - or a seat on the platform, or an invitation, or an invitation to a society function - a man will risk losing his honour and integrity. How very sad: 'Verily' said Jesus 'they shall have their reward'. 22 underlines the danger stressed in 20b, and reminds us in addition that the covetous eye also suffers from shortsightedness. It is disquieting to see how many people can be completely taken in by a specious flatterer (23b). It can only be because they want to believe what he says that this can happen. If so, this means that they have a problem in themselves that needs to be faced. Outspokenness in this context is all the more welcome; but we need to beware of the insensitive 'outspokenness' of the man who prides himself in 'calling a spade a spade'. 24 recalls to us our Lord's strictures on the Pharisees in Mark 7:11, and Paul's forthright injunctions in 1 Tim 5:4, 8. Charity begins at home! Some pertinent comments about the heart are given in 25 and 26. To be 'proud of heart' (the RSV has 'greedy', and the same is true of this also) is to be out of joint, and anyone who is out of joint is going to cause trouble. He does not have to say anything, he simply needs to be there, and trouble will emanate from him. 25b and 26a should be read along with 3:5, 6 (see Note for Sept 1st 1973) Walking in wisdom (RSV) is a New Testament theme also (Eph 5:15, Col 4:5). With 27, compare 11:24-26 and 22:9. It is more blessed to give than to receive, as Jesus said, and it is one of the wonderful paradoxes of spiritual life that generous spirits never seem to lack 28 re-echoes 12 (cf also 29:2) When the truth of 28b is understood, it helps us to appreciate why the Psalmist prayed so frequently for the Lord to deal with the wicked.

193) 29:1-6

This chapter brings us to the last of Hezekiah's collection of Solomon's proverbs, which began at 25:1. The emphasis in 1 is very solemn. Even the patience of God Himself comes to an end at last, and men pass the point of no return. The story of Herod in the gospels is a case in point Jesus at the end had no word to say to him. For the thought in 2, see 28:12, 28. It is righteous government that makes for true happiness. Rectitude pays the best dividends, and this should be the blueprint in political situations: not expediency, not economics, but righteousness. 3 echoes 28:7 and 10:1. 'Substance in 3b may be the father's, or his own. Perhaps the elder son in the story of the prodigal in Luke 15 had this verse in mind when criticising his brother's behaviour: The theme in 4 is bribery and corruption, and the destroying effect this has on society Judgment (which so often in the O.T. means justice, fair dealing) is the urgent alternative; no land can be established and stable without it. Compare 5 with 28:23. The spreading of the net seems to indicate that flattery will get a man all tangled up in awkward and even ruinous situations, for he is simply being used by the flatterer for his own purposes. Are we susceptible? Easily taken in? In 6, we have a similar metaphor to that in 5, but here the snare enmeshes the evil man himself. The reason why he is ensnared in his transgression is that there is something in evil which is too powerful for man, something he does not reckon with, which is essentially self-destructive. On the other hand the righteous man escapes the entanglement, and so has something to sing about.

194) 29:7-12

The thought in 7 has an interesting implication. A man who is basically righteous has two qualities: on the one hand he is compassionate towards others, and on the other, he is compassionate because he is not self-centred; he has time to think about them. When we read this into our Lord's tremendous words in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31 ff), 'Lord, when saw we Thee an hungered and did not minister unto Thee?' we see the force of what is said in the proverb: 'the wicked regardeth not to know it'. In 8, one commentator cites 1 Kings 12:6-14 as an instance of what is said. Rehoboam's attitude to the counsel of the old men around him certainly kindled a disastrous flame in the northern kingdom (see RSV). The meaning of 9 seems to be (to use Kidner's words). "There is no arguing calmly with a fool." It is not clear whether 'he' in 9b refers to the wise man or to the fool. The RSV thinks the latter, the AV the former. Perhaps the AV has the truth of the matter. One recalls Jesus' words 'We have piped to you, and ye have not danced, we have mourned with you, and ye have not wept' (Matt 11:17), and this illustrates the point. The second line of 10 is best rendered. 'As for the upright they seek his life` (so RV). Evil men cannot stand righteousness, they react instantly to it this is something seen with monotonous regularity in common experience. 'Mind' in 11 means 'spirit', and the RSV properly translates it as 'anger'. The proverb is about self-control. The man who cannot control himself is a fool. The message in 12 is 'like king, like people'. A vicious circle operates here: which comes first, the ruler's evil in listening to lies (e.g. flattering lies), of his servants", in speaking these lies to him. They become evil because of the evil in him that tolerates their evil.

195) 29:13-17

There is an echo of 22:2 in 13: we all share common ground in the things that matter - illness war death, forgiveness (cf also Matt 5:44,45). Kidner's note on 14 is fine and to the point: "The test of a man in power. and his hidden strength, is the extent to which he keeps faith with those who can put least pressure on him" To do justly by them not for something in them, but for something in him a ruler of this calibre will last, and he will deserve to' 15 and 17 belong together, and underline again an oft-repeated emphasis in Proverbs Discipline is not only needed, it is also wanted by the young generation. 'Left to himself' means lacking in love and therefore lacking in correction and care alike. It is not accidental that some of the modern movements that have succeeded in attracting and holding young people today impose strict patterns of discipline on their adherents. They know what is needed, and what is wanted! A good title for 17 would be 'Through discipline to delight', Firm and kindly discipline God is pledged to reward. One thinks of the analogy of learning to play the piano: duty and drudgery are the order of the day for so long; and then, suddenly, you are through to delight, technique becomes unconscious, and artistry results. So it is with the training of children: for long you see little commensurate reward. But wait! Of 16, Ironside comments, "It is a principle of God's moral government that though lawlessness may seem, like the flood, to prevail over the highest mountains, it shall surely retreat, and righteousness hold sway at last" (cf Hab 2:2-4).

196) 29:18-23

In this famous verse (18), 'vision' has the sense of the revelation a prophet received (hence RSV's 'prophecy'), 'Perish' (AV) and "cast off restraint" (RSV) both bear a solemn message: the process and progress is given in RSV, the end-result in AV, The suggestion is made that Exo 32:25 may well, be the intended background of the proverb, with its contrast between the glory on the mountain of vision and law, and the shame in the valley. We should note particularly the equation of vision and keeping the law, So many suppose mistakenly that keeping the law is legalism, The LXX reads 'a stubborn servant' in 19, and this probably gives the right sense. A good servant will rise above this. What is said, however, is often true on the spiritual level: we are all too frequently unresponsive to the words of God, and need His chastising rod to put us in order, 20 echoes 26:12 (see Note) In 21 we have a further word about servants, Commentators generally take this in a bad sense, with the suggestion that pampering servants is sure to lead to trouble, But it may be taken in a good sense also (cf 19): to deal well with a servant - even one with a slave mentality - will humanise him (of Paul's attitude to Onesimus in Philemon, treating him as a human being and speaking of him as a son), Moffatt renders 22b 'hot temper is the cause of many a sin', A man's general disposition is in view here. not a mere isolated incident. In 23, it is 'pride cometh before a fall'. The story of Haman and Mordecai in Esther amply illustrates this proverb.

197) 29:24-27

In 24, we have a good example of how sinning compels further sin, The meaning seems to be that to be in complicity with a thief is to be one's own worst enemy, for one will almost certainly be caught, and if, in court, when put on oath, one refuses to disclose the full truth, perjury can be committed, which leads to further and greater trouble. Well might Paul warn Timothy, 'Be not partaker in other men's sins'! The Truth expressed in 25 is applicable on different levels. In spiritual life it can be disastrous and paralysing, To be silent when we should speak, for fear of men, leads into bondage (this is one meaning of 'snare'). Currying favour (26) is always a rather pathetic and disreputable exercise. It is God's favour that is important, and if we are walking with Him, and assured of His smile, we can hold our heads high and not be dependent on any man's patronage. In 27 we are faced with ultimates and absolutes. There can be no mixing of the two classes mentioned here, the just and the unjust. Oil and water do not mix. And it is best to realise this from the outset, for it will save much trouble later on. There is a war on in the universe, with two irreconcilable opposites in conflict with each other. Evil will never change into good, although -thank God - evil men may become good through the grace of the gospel. As Kidner puts it, though 'common interests and mutual attraction at various levels may mask this enmity; nothing can mend it.'

198) 30:1-4

There is more than an element of mystery as to the identity of Agur (1), whose sayings are recorded in this chapter. The words 'even the prophecy' in AV are taken by the RSV as a proper name: 'Agur, son of Jakeh of Massa'. The AV more accurately reflects the Hebrew original, and the phrase may be taken to emphasise the authority of what follows. Also, the words 'Ithiel and Ucal' are rendered in the AV margin as 'I have wearied myself, O God, and am consumed', and these words introduce the verses that follow very appropriately, for in them the writer expresses his sense of nothingness in face of the mystery of life (2-4). One does not have to read very far to hear echoes of Job. The atmosphere of the chapter, and the attitude that underlies it, is very reminiscent of the later chapters of Job (e.g. 38 ff) and seem to bespeak the same kind of revelation of God that the patriarch had. At all events, the sense of the vastness and mysteriousness of life is present, and the consciousness of how little he knows in face of that mystery (cf also Psalm 139). It is this that imparts such a quality of humility to the writer. The revelation of God cuts a man down to size, and inculcates a fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. Ultimately (4), there are questions that are answered only by the revelation of God in Christ, in the New Testament, in His descent (Incarnation) and ascension and exaltation - and coming again (cf John 3:13, Ephes4: 9, 10).

199) 30:5-9

In 5ff, we are given the answer to the questions raised in 4: revelation in and through the Word. There is a word from God to answer these age-old questions. Since that word is true (literally, 'refined', and therefore 'proved true', RSV), it is utterly to be trusted: it offers complete protection (5b), because it brings us into contact (and fellowship) with Him who speaks it it is this that is the final answer to the sense of nothingness that the mystery of life brings upon us (2-4). Another consequence of the 'refined-ness' of God's word is seen in 6: it cannot be added to. This means that the revelation is complete. This underlines an important consideration for us: there is no such thing as new revelation, and anything that claims to be such must be banded as heresy. New light and illumination can come on what has been revealed, and this is a constant factor, but this is not the same as new revelation. And every new illumination and insight must therefore be brought into the touchstone of what has once for all been revealed; if it is at odds with that, it is false and spurious. 7-9 seem to follow in sequence upon what has been already said: this is what the discipline of the Word is meant to, and should, produce in us, the impact of revelation upon a man's life. It is a prayer about character (8a), and the circumstances that endanger character (8b, 9). A similar sort of prayer is seen in 1 Chron 4:10 (cf also Paul in Phil 4:11, 12). On the one hand, there is the yearning to be delivered from iniquity - 'before I die' (cf Rom 8:23, 'groaning, waiting for the adoption'); on the other hand, the desire for a right attitude to temporal things: since sin is still a reality in the believer's life, and a power to be reckoned with, he dare not expose himself to too much temptation. Abject poverty and unlimited affluence both alike prove dangerous to the life of the spirit. Here is grass-roots realism indeed!

200) 30:10-16

These verses amply demonstrate what happens in life when the character in 7-9 is not developed. Certainly, if we breathe the spirit of 1-9, we shall be less and less disposed to make accusations in the spirit of 10. The different kinds of ugly and anti-social behaviour mentioned in 11-14 remind us that the alternative to integrity of character is not the negative absence of good qualities, but a positive presence of evil in the life. A progression may be intended and implied here: childhood arrogance, wildness and undisciplined youth, brutality. As Kidner says, pride corrupts 'a person's attitude to his superiors (11), to himself (12), to the world at large (13), and his supposed inferiors (14). In 15, 16, an even more frightening consequence of the refusal of the disciplines of the Word is seen. The theme is craving. We pointed out in an earlier Note (see on 27:20) that the essence of a wrong desire is that it cannot be satisfied. It is unsatisfiable. It must therefore be cut out and destroyed. Nothing but the Word has power to do this in a man. It is significant also that the verses follow immediately upon 11-14. Proud and arrogant as man is, his heart remains unsatisfied. He never gets what he asks of life, Even his cruelty (14) is not slaked. Augustine once prayed, 'O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee'. This is the only answer to human craving; and it is as well that we see, in these verses, the grim and terrifying alternatives.

201) 30:17-23

There is something in the nature of a climax in the words of 17. Evil - such as that portrayed in 11-14 - eventually catches up with a man, and this is generally the end of the story. A nemesis overtakes him. In the remainder of the chapter we have a series of grouped sayings each introduced with the words 'three or four'. The first group gives us four marvels, things unsearchable in the world of nature and of men. The word-pictures are graphic and fascinating. We may ask what note is being struck and what point being made, Kidner is surely right in suggesting that it is "the easy mastery, by the appropriate agent, of elements as difficult to negotiate as air, rock, sea - and young woman" - the effortlessness, almost, and the naturalness of the thing. A fifth marvel, however, introduces a different note (20) - here is a woman at ease, and at home, in her sinful ways. This naturalness is deeply unnatural. This is something that must defy all understanding. There is, after all, something incomprehensible about sin, and its perversity cannot, ultimately, be fathomed. The next series of pictures (21-23) speak of things that are unbearable or intolerable. The keynote here is incongruity. The upstart who becomes too big for his boots, and who carries the slave mentality into authority and government (22a), presents an incongruous picture which offends one's sense of the fitness of things, as does the churlish fellow (22b) stuffing himself with food. The odious woman (23) is one who is hated, or unloved (RSV). If the latter, it is a picture that calls forth pity and concern, even if she has somewhat brought it on herself. Another meaning, however, is possible. Ironside comments "Unamiable and vindictive in her disposition, she destroys the peace and happiness of her husband and dependents." The reference in 23b may be similar to that in 29:21 (see Note); it may, however have more sinister undertones. The LXX reads 'A handmaid when she hath supplanted her mistress', and this would mean being responsible for breaking up a marriage by alienating a husband's affections. It would be given, of course, the elevated name of romance by the husband and the handmaid, but it needs to be called by its proper name, and seen to be the squalid and despicable thing it is. 23.

202) 30:24-33

The next series of pictures (24-28) is of things little but wise: ants, conies (rock badgers or marmots), locusts and spiders (rather, lizards as in RSV). The keynote in 25 is provision. The ants know how to look ahead and lay up for the future. Prudence is the abiding characteristic of their way. In the spiritual sense, the parallel here would be: Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven. The conies (26), little rabbit like creatures, though feeble, make their houses in the rocks, and are therefore not easily hurt or caught. Safety is the keynote here. One recalls Jesus' words about building one's house on the rock. With the locusts in 27, the emphasis is on order. They are soldierly creatures. One thinks of 1 Chron 12:38 and the reference there to 'men that could keep rank'. This is an effective word against 'loners' who think they can be out on their own in Christian life. It is so easy to indulge a fancy here which is simply carnal. It panders to self, and becomes an excuse for not submitting to the general discipline of the body of Christ. We must beware of being odd man out in spiritual things. The spider (lizard) in 28 is a climber, and gets places, small as it is. No wall is too smooth for it to scale. It is said of Mallory and Irving, who were lost on Everest, that when last seen they were still climbing. That is a great epitaph'. In 29-31 the pictures are of four comely things. The lion (30) is the symbol of courage and virtue, and it is this that should mark the Christian soldier as he earnestly contends for the faith. 'Greyhound' in 31 has been variously translated; the word means 'girded as to the loins', and therefore may be applied to any creature characterised by swiftness and fleetness of foot. One thinks of Paul's words in Phil 3:14, 'I press toward the mark'. A he-goat is also fleet of foot, and walks in the high places of the earth. The spiritual application of 'kingship' lies in the summons to the believer to royal living in Christ. The chapter ends with a call to humility (32, 33). Kidner sums up the chapter beautifully²????????????????????, the undercurrent of this chapter, which has already commended itself (directly or by contrast) as reverence (1-9), restraint (10-17) and wonder (18-31), is finally manifested as peaceable behaviour (32,33).² The servant of the Lord must not strive (2 Tim 2:24).

² Text unreadable see readings for February 1974

203) 31:1-2

The final chapter of this remarkable book brings us to the words of King Lemuel (1-9). This name means 'belonging to God' or 'dedicated to God'. It could be a nom-de-plume for Solomon, or some other king; but we do not know. Certainly, no king of this name is recorded to have ruled in Israel. If, then, he was outwith the covenants of promise, this must be taken as an instance of the wisdom of the east being gathered up and assimilated into the divine revelation. Lemuel's wisdom is recorded as having been taught him by his mother. It is interesting to recall that a good part of the earlier chapters of Proverbs dealt with the inspiration that a father dispensed to his son. Here, now, is motherly wisdom. This is some indication that both father and mother are needed, as a team, in the ministry of bringing up their families. In this connection, there may well be a link between what is said here and what follows in 10-31. It is the kind of woman described in the final part of the chapter who is likely to make significant impact on the lives of her children. The threefold 'what' in 2 is indicative of the mother's anxiety to give good advice to her son. Kidner suggests that the exclamations are affectionately reproachful, as she 'shames him by two things that he knows very well: that he matters to her (2a) and that she has vowed him to God (2b). The phrase 'son of my vows' reminds us of the beautiful story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, and of Paul's words in 1 Tim 1.18, 4:14. Is there not an important message here in relation to the vows we make on behalf of our children?

204) 31:3 9

Now comes the instruction the exhortation The RSV reads more clearly and accurately than the AV In 3 and 4 a twofold danger for all kingliness is underlined, licentiousness and intemperance This should be taken in the widest spiritual, as well as literal sense. It is true for royalty - they have responsibilities, and they must not jeopardise themselves, but it is also true that licentiousness and intemperance militate against true royal manliness. How salutary is this emphasis' As Kidner says, 'these verses take away the glamour from lot se living', We should also learn from these verses that some things permitted to other men are not permitted to those in the public eye How false to suppose that such a position gives a man more freedom Some think that 6 and 7 indicate the right use of strong drink, and quote Paul's exhortation to Timothy in 1 Tim 5:23 - that is, a medicinal use Others quote the practice in our Lord's day of providing medicated drink to criminals condemned to die by crucifixion, in order to deaden the pain. But it may well be that a note of irony is ringing in these verses, as if to say, 'Give it only to those who are beyond the pale, who are too far gone to be further damaged or harmed by it 8 and 9 may be linked with 6 and 7: mouths should be opened, not to imbibe liquor but to speak on behalf of the poor and needy, and if so, this goes back also to 5, which underlines the danger of one's judgment - and compassion and humanity - being blurred and perverted by habits of hard drinking ' When you open your mouth, let it be to speak for the dumb those unable to get a fair hearing, fulfil your royal calling and responsibility to be the protector of the under- privileged, and all who are left desolate " We should set this as a salutary corrective over against the bombardment of obscene advertisements about strong drink on cur television screens and bill-boards.

205) 31:10-12

One wonders if there is a message in this wonderful picture for King Lemuel? He has been warned of the dangers of the 'strange woman'; here, in contrast, is the kind of wife he ought to look for! It is a useful yardstick by which to measure, and with all a useful standard for the ladies themselves! Kidner warns against taking this standard as being within the reach of all, since it presupposes unusual gifts and material resources. Rather, he adds, "it shows the fullest flowering of domesticity, which is revealed as no petty and restricted sphere, and its mistress as no cipher". This is for us perhaps the important emphasis - 'no petty or restricted sphere' - in view of the fairly widespread feelings often expressed today of frustration and restriction, Do these words say to us, 'It is what you make it' e all events, it is the 'creative" emphasis that is significant in these verses. Here is a woman who has carved out for herself an interesting life; and although this particular pattern and expression may not be for all, the principle is surely valid, and some kind of creative and interesting and fulfilling pattern can be evolved.

In 10-12 we see this woman in relation to her husband. 'Virtuous woman' is translated by RSV as 'a good wife'. Does not everything start here? If this relationship is wrong, everything is wrong. This applies just as much to those who are not married as to those who are: for if attitudes are wrong; how much of life is coloured r by resentments, frustrations, preoccupations, hankerings, which corrode the human heart and put people hopelessly out of sorts. We should note also the emphasis on 'trust', even more than on 'love' 12 fulfils the biblical idea and ideal of 'help-meet', one who 'stands over against' the husband, to challenge him to be all he can be, and to rise to his real destiny.

206) 31:13-25

Next, we see the wife in relation to her duties. The keynote throughout is industry. Look at the work she gets through` Where did she learn all this? One does not suddenly develop this 'in vacuo'. It needs training; and one is obliged to conclude that this kind of training is often at a discount in our modern homes. Here, it may be, is a word to young girls, and it asks, How do you do at home? Do you help with the washing up? the cleaning? the chores? the cooking? Or, when you go to other homes, does it occur to you to offer to help? The Christian witness of many young people, in the more obvious forms of outreach - e.g. seaside missions, coffee-bars - is often negated by the failure of their practical Christianity at home. It is not because we have too much to do but generally because we are thoughtless, that we are not involved in such things. This woman is extremely busy, with so many irons in the fire as would make us suppose she would hardly have time to think of others, but no, her heart is 'at leisure from itself, to soothe and sympathise'. She stretches out her hands to the poor and needy, and fulfils a ministry of compassion towards them. A spirit of detachment and therefore of compassion - an interesting combination indeed!

'Scarlet' in 21 may not be the correct rendering of the Hebrew, which could be made to read 'double', and the meaning would therefore be that her household are clothed with double clothing, or heavily lined clothing. This would be a more practical answer to snowy, stormy weather than being clothed 'in scarlet'!

207) 31:13-25

A very valid question that these verses raise is: 'Is it right or wrong for a married woman to go out to work?' This is a question on which people have strong and often very heated attitudes. On the basis of this passage, however, it would be very difficult to answer in the affirmative and say, 'Of course it is wrong for a married woman to go out to work, a woman's place is in the home'. For here is a woman, active in business, in trade and industry, in the stock market, and making money, and for her, it was not only not wrong, but was a commendation. We must therefore bring our attitudes in this question, and it may be, our prejudices also, to the bar of God's Word, and test them by that infallible criterion. The problem in this area, lies in fact in the abuses of the situation, not in the principle itself. If, by her being out at work, her children are neglected; if money becomes a god; if married couples get to depend on two incomes; if working mothers leads to the displacement of normal family commitments; then one can readily see the dangers and inadvisability of it. In relation to the last-mentioned point - family commitments very real ethical and, for Christians, spiritual problems are raised by the attitude which says 'We shall get married, but we will not have children for some time, because we both want to work and raise enough money to provide a comfortable home'. It is to be feared that this is an attitude that is assumed as a matter of course to be legitimate and even commendable for Christian people. We would simply and firmly point out that such assumption needs to be closely and carefully scrutinized in the light of the teaching of Scripture. It is certainly never a decision that can be made 'as a matter of course'. It needs divine sanction and ordination!

208) 31:26-31

The final verses show the woman in relation to her household and children. It is said that you do not know whether you have been a success in bringing up your children until you see how they, in turn, bring up theirs: This is worth pondering. Here are children who rise up to call their mother blessed. There is something very lovely in the admiration a family have for their parents. In 30, we have the heart of all: she is a woman that feareth the Lord. But we should notice particularly how this fear of the Lord is expressed: in practical, ethical ways. There is no empty profession here; the reality of her religion is seen in her behaviour, in her industry. Bridges says, "We observe that religion does not slacken attention to temporal duties. It rather renders a woman scrupulously exact in all her household obligations, in everything within her province; careful not by her negligence to bring reproach upon her holy profession. Why should she be careless or slovenly, putting her important duties out of time, out of place? Of her it is specially expected, as the summing up of all her practical exercises, that 'she should have diligently followed every good work'". Here, then, is the mirror of God's Word - for women, and for men. King Lemuel, this is the kind of woman for you; but you will need to remember that if you want a wife like this, you will have to be worthy of her!