

Sovereignty of the Lord Over Human Secrets

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[0 : 0 0] I will read first from Proverbs chapter 20, verse 24, going to chapter 21, verse 2. A man's steps are from the Lord.

How then can man understand his way? It is a snare to say rashly it is holy and to reflect only after making vows. A wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them.

The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts. Steadfast love and faithfulness preserve the king, and by steadfast love his throne is upheld.

The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair. Blows that wound cleanses away evil. Strokes may clean the innermost parts.

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever he will. Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart. This is God's holy and authoritative word.

[1 : 1 1] Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we depend on you this morning to address us from your word. Speak to us. You are our king. Lord, we pray. Call us to submit to you.

Transform us. Grant us humility. So that we might be a people who rely on the finished work of Jesus Christ for our justification.

Our righteousness. That we might put all our hope there. That we might put all our faith in Jesus. And leave this place renewed in the joy of salvation.

In the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. The previous passage began and ended with an identical proverb.

That unequal weights are an abomination to the Lord. And false scales are not good. It teaches us that justice is not some arbitrary standard that man made up.

[2 : 1 9] Or a mere agreement. A social contract. But something that God himself created and upholds. And as the law giver, God is the only one who holds the ultimate authority to judge us.

That's what this passage is about. We human beings are very good at giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt. We tend to cast ourselves in the best possible light. We often justify our own thoughts and behaviors.

But this passage teaches us that instead of justifying ourselves, we should seek the justification of the God who searches our innermost being. Now this passage is structured concentrically or symmetrically.

So if you look with me at 20:24 to 21:2. So first, verse 24 and 25 of chapter 20 contrasts the man and the Lord, emphasizing the sovereignty and knowledge of the Lord over man.

And those verses are matched by chapter 21, verse 2 at the end of this unit, which also contrasts the man and the Lord, emphasizing the sovereignty and knowledge of the Lord over man.

[3 : 28] And then chapter 20, verse 26 compares the king who rids his kingdom of the wicked to a farmer who winnows and threshes the grain. And this is matched by chapter 21, verse 1, which also uses an agricultural metaphor of irrigation and says that the Lord directs the king's heart like a stream of water in his hand.

Chapter 20, verse 27 speaks of how the Lord searches the innermost parts of man. And chapter 20, verse 30 speaks of corporal punishment, which cleanses the innermost parts of man.

And finally, in the middle, meeting in the middle, verse 28 and 29 speak of the pillars of a strong kingdom. What makes a strong kingdom? It requires a king who is characterized by steadfast love and faithfulness, young men in their youthful strength, and old men in their gray hair of wisdom.

So the king, youth, and the aged. And so reflecting this structure that's here, I'm going to speak on those matching verses as we go through this passage. So first, let's start in verse 24.

It begins by telling us why, instead of justifying ourselves, we should seek the justification of the God who searches our innermost being. It says, A man's steps are from the Lord.

[4 : 43] How then can man understand his way? It's very similar to a proverb we saw earlier in chapter 16, verse 9. It said, Jeremiah 10.23 says similarly, I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.

The steps we take, the ways we walk, are not in ourselves, but in the God who directs us. So this notion that we are masters of our own faith is nothing but an illusion.

It's kind of like being a backseat driver. I'm sure you've all driven with one in the car. A backseat driver is a passenger that gives the driver many unwanted advice.

And even though he is himself not responsible for the driving and has no control over it whatsoever. So this backseat driver might even move his foot like he's pushing down on the brakes.

He might even, you know, he might yell, Stop, stop, stop, slow down, slow down. He has many ideas of how the car should be driven. But in the end, he is not the driver. Please don't take this analogy the wrong way.

[6 : 10] I don't mean to diminish the real responsibility that human beings have. But I'm trying to illustrate the fact that we are not the ultimate deciders of what happens in our lives.

Human responsibility is real, yes, but it is subordinate to God's sovereignty. God is on the driver's seat. He is the conductor who directs our steps.

And for this reason, it says, Man cannot understand his way. Drivers nowadays, and I include myself in this, are more clueless about roads and directions.

And I think part of the reason for that is because we're so used to following the step-by-step orders of our GPS without paying actual attention to our surroundings and to the roads that we are on.

If someone else determines your steps, you're not going to fully grasp which way you're going. That's essentially what Solomon is saying here. No human being fully understands his way of life, his destiny.

[7 : 12] Yes, we make choices, but we don't even fully understand our own reasons for those choices. We cannot predict what will happen to us tomorrow, let alone a year from now. And the admission of this ignorance fosters humility.

A humble person admits that we are not ultimately responsible for all our wins in life, and it is instead full of thanksgiving toward God. A humble person admits that we are not in control of our ultimate destiny, and because of that, ironically, is able to rest instead of always being full of fear, worry, and frenetic energy.

And since the future is not in our hands, but in God's, we should not rashly make vows to God that we might not fulfill. Verse 25 says, It is a snare to say rashly it is holy, and to reflect only after making vows.

What's in view here is a vow of dedication, declaring that someone or something is holy to God, meaning consecrated or set apart for God. A tragic example of this found in Judges chapter 11, where Jephthah makes a vow to the Lord, saying, If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's.

And I will offer it up for a burnt offering. And of course, who should come out from his house to meet him but his only child, an unmarried daughter?

[8 : 49] Jephthah was wrong on several counts. First, he shouldn't have thought that he could manipulate God into acting on his behalf. Second, in dedicating what comes out of his house to meet him, Jephthah opened himself up to the pagan Ammonite practice of child sacrifice to their false god, Molech, which is explicitly prohibited in Leviticus 18.21.

And so he defeats the wicked Ammonites who sacrificed their children to Molech, only then to offer his child as a sacrifice to the god who does not accept human sacrifice.

And third, and this is the point of connection to our passage, Jephthah should never have made such a rash vow in the first place. He has no idea what or who would come out of his house.

A person who makes a rash vow like that is like an animal that carelessly runs into a snare, a trap. It was easy to get into, but impossible to get out of. Ecclesiastes 5, verses 2-7 give us a glimpse into the human heart that makes such rash vows.

It says, Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

[10 : 08] For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words. When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow.

It is better that you should not vow, then you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity. But God is the one you must fear. What does this teach us about rash vows?

At the heart of rash vows is human vanity and the absence of the fear of God. We make stammering vows, blustering promises, presumptuous forecasts, and bloated resolutions.

Why? Because we are vain. Because we are proud. Because we think that we have more control over our own steps than we actually do.

[11 : 16] But Proverbs show us a better way. Humility. The fear of the Lord. Living in reverent submission to God and His ways. Which makes us more careful to speak.

In the Hebrew, verse 25 literally says, It is a snare of man to say rashly it is holy. So then the word, a word for man is repeated three times in verses 24 and 25.

A man's steps are from the Lord. How then can man understand his way? It is a snare of man to say rashly it is holy and to reflect only after making vows. This repetition intentionally emphasized the contrast between man and the Lord.

It's intended to put us in our place. Remember, you're just a man. A creature. Know that the Lord is God. Your creator.

And these verses are matched by chapter 21, verse 2, which says, Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart. This is reminiscent of chapter 16, verse 2, which said, All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit.

[12 : 29] We think that we are justified in all that we do, because if we didn't think so, we wouldn't do it. We think that we are right in all that we believe, because if we didn't think so, we wouldn't believe it.

But we do not see everything rightly, because our knowledge is partial. We do not understand our own way. The Lord, on the other hand, weighs the heart.

Not the physical organ, but the invisible, immaterial inner person. Even this invisible, weightless center of our motives is weighed by the Lord. This is why, instead of justifying ourselves, we should seek the justification of the God who searches our innermost being.

Judging is God's unique prerogative. The ultimate judging. A human being is incapable of judging him or herself rightly.

And that's why 1 Corinthians 4, verse 4, Paul says this of himself, I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.

[13 : 33] It is the Lord who judges me. Even though his conscience was clear, even though he was not aware of any sin, any offense that he had himself caused, he says he is not thereby acquitted, because it's the Lord who judges him.

And the king who rules over people ought to do so at God's pleasure and in accordance with God's will. And that's why it says in verse 26, a wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them.

So winnowing is an agricultural practice of tossing the harvested grain up into the air in order to let the heavier grain, the kernels fall to the ground while the chaff and the dirt and the dust are blown away by the wind.

Similarly, driving the wheel over them is a reference to threshing grain. By driving the wheel over the grain, it removes the kernel from the plant. So both of these references communicate the idea of separating out the wicked from the righteous.

This is what the wise king should do. The king should separate out those who use unequal weights and false scales in business. The king should separate out those who make rash vows, only to renege on them later.

[14 : 42] But it's not enough for the king to rid the kingdom of evildoers. He must also protect and provide for his citizens. So chapter 20, verse 26, is matched by chapter 21, verse 1, which also deals with the king and mentions another agricultural metaphor.

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever he wills. This is an irrigation metaphor. The king's heart is compared to a stream of water that enables farming.

Especially in the dry ancient Near East, water was an invaluable source of life. And so they built reservoirs to collect rainwater, and then they built dams and canals to direct that water to the fields that needed it.

And just as it is the Lord who weighs the heart that enables the king to winnow the wicked, it is the Lord who directs the king's heart to water and nourish his people.

It's really an awe-inspiring picture of God's sovereign control. Even the heart of the king, the most free and sovereign human being in the realm, is but a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, which he turns wherever he wills.

[15 : 58] We see many examples of this throughout Scripture. According to Isaiah chapter 10, verse 6 and 7, Tiglath-Pileser, the third king of Assyria from the 8th century BC, who invaded Israel for his own purposes, was but an instrument of God's wrath for the sins of Israel.

Cyrus the Great, the famed king of Persia from the 6th century BC too, was God's servant, according to Isaiah chapter 45, verse 1. It was God who directed Artaxerxes, the king of Persia from the 5th century BC, to allow the Jewish exile to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, according to Ezra chapter 7, verse 21.

How does this apply to us? If you're anxious or losing sleep over the upcoming presidential election, be reminded of this wonderful truth. No matter who wins the election in November, even when the king or president who rules over us seems capricious and unjust, even the most unpredictable ruler cannot overflow the banks of God's sovereign control.

He is but a stream of water in the hand of the Lord who turns it wherever he will. I'm not saying we should be passive, we should be informed citizens, we should vote, sure, but always rest assured of God's sovereign rule.

And since rulers are out to represent God, they are aided in this task of winnowing the wicked and watering the kingdom by the Lord who searches all things. It says in verse 27, the spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts.

[17 : 38] The spirit of man refers to the inner person that is hidden from plain view. Though not a single person fully understands the inner workings of his own heart, he nevertheless understands it better than any other human being.

And even people who are open books have their own secrets. This is the spirit of man. Paul refers to this idea in 2 Corinthians 2, where in order to illustrate that the Holy Spirit of God knows the mind of God and reveals the wisdom of God, he uses this analogy.

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? The spirit of man is the inner person that searches his or her own heart and mind.

But this private, secret inner man is the lamp of the Lord. It functions like a flashlight for God to light up the man's innermost parts.

Once again, there's a contrast between man and the Lord. The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord. And this emphasizes the shocking reality that man's inner workings, the deepest, the most inaccessible thoughts of his mind, the darkest recesses of our hearts, they are completely exposed before the Lord who searches our innermost beings.

[19 : 02] And for this reason, the Lord can aid the king, his representative, in ruling justly, should they depend on him. Chapter 20, verse 27, then is matched by chapter 20, verse 30.

Blows that wound cleanse away evil. Strokes make clean the innermost parts. Both verses refer to the innermost parts of man. Since the Lord searches the innermost parts of man, it is the king's duty to cleanse the innermost parts of evildoers.

And this requires corporal punishment. The word cleanse literally means to scour or polish something. So a bodily punishment somehow, according to this proverb, polishes or scrubs off the evil from our inner being.

Various forms of corporal punishment have been used throughout the millennia throughout human history in homes, in schools, in courts and military bases.

It was not until the latter half of the 20th century that corporal punishment largely fell out of favor in the West. But not every form of corporal punishment, as it is commonly believed, is cruel and unusual punishment.

[20 : 14] And verse 30 tells us that there is a connection between our bodies and spirits. A lagging conscience can be spurred on with such punishment.

If our immediate reaction is to think that this is barbaric or unenlightened, we should consider perhaps that it's our own chronological snobbery that makes us think that way.

It's the immature teenagers who think that their ancient parents understand nothing. As they mature and grow, they tend to appreciate their parents' wisdom and experience more.

Likewise, why civilizations learn and glean from the wisdom of history. Consider this example. A few years ago, American Society for Microbiology published a paper entitled A Thousand-Year-Old Antimicrobial Remedy with Antistaphylococcal Activity.

It was written by an interdisciplinary team made up of researchers from both the sciences and the humanities. A medieval scholar on the team translated a 10th century, so a thousand years old, a 10th century Anglo-Saxon leech book which prescribed various plant-based remedies for treating staph infection.

[21 : 29] They decided to test it in the labs to see if it works. They learned that not only did this outmoded, no longer used remedy repeatedly killed the bacteria, it also killed superstaph, the staph bacteria that had grown resistant to the modern antibiotic methicillin.

Now, I use this as an illustration to caution against uncritically accepting the prevailing assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account automatically discredited.

Don't be too quick to dismiss certain actions and positions as having no business in the 21st century. As J.R.R. Tolkien sagely advises through the voice of character Glorfindel in The Return of the King, pay heed to the tales of old wives.

It may well be that they alone keep in memory what it was once needful for the wise to know. Now, that brings us to the center of the concentric structure of this passage.

Chapter 20, verse 28, 29, which speak of the constituencies that make up a strong kingdom. First, verse 28, says, Steadfast love and faithfulness preserve the king and by steadfast love his throne is upheld.

[22 : 47] Steadfast love and faithfulness are two of the most commonly mentioned attributes of God in scripture. And when describing God, they together refer to God's unchanging love and steadfast commitment toward his people.

And these attributes should characterize the king, whoever rules over people also, because the king over God's people is supposed to be God's representative. And when the king rules with steadfast love and faithfulness, they in turn, those virtues in turn, preserve the king and uphold his throne.

Because a populace with a benevolent ruler is loyal and supportive. But the throne of the king who forsakes steadfast love will not long be established. Second, a robust kingdom requires both the vigor of youth and the wisdom of the agent.

Verse 29 says, The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair. The young and old in society are meant to complement one another. The young men offer their strength, which is their glory, and the old men offer their gray hair, which, according to Proverbs 16, 31, is a crown of glory gained in a righteous life, a symbol of experience and wisdom.

This applies to both men and women, though only men are mentioned here in a representative way. So a strong youth and wise elderly working harmoniously together, ruled by a king characterized by steadfast love and faithfulness.

[24 : 13] That's what's necessary for a thriving nation, a thriving kingdom. This focus on kingship throughout the book of Proverbs is not surprising because King Solomon is its principal author.

And its teaching on the importance of a righteous king culminates in the coming of the long-anticipated messianic king, Jesus Christ. And after telling people to pay attention to his message, Jesus says this of himself in Luke 11, 31 to 32.

The queen of the south will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them. For she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

Solomon was the epitome of a wise king in the Old Testament. But Jesus claims that he is greater than Solomon because he is the wisdom of God incarnate in the flesh.

He is the messianic king who was promised long ago, who reigns over his people. And though all the faithful expected Jesus, this wise king, to winnow the wicked and drive the wheel over them, though they expected Jesus to cleanse away evil with blows that wound and strokes that made clean, though they expected Jesus to overthrow the Roman Empire, the oppressors of Israel.

[25 : 38] Instead, Jesus went to the cross and was executed by the Romans. And this was to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 53, verses 46.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins, to absorb the punishment that we deserved as those who had rebelled against God.

Though we might think of ourselves as pretty good moral people in the eyes of the world, in the eyes of the Lord who searches all our innermost parts, we are the wicked that must be winnowed like chaff because we had all gone astray from the way of the Lord.

[26 : 48] We didn't understand our own way. And as Psalm 139 says, the Lord has searched us and knows us. He knows when we sit down and when we rise up. He discerns our thoughts from afar.

He searches our path and our lying down and are acquainted with all our ways. God knows where you have been. God knows your innermost thoughts.

The darkest corners of your heart are brightly lit before Him. There is no hiding from God. And yet, King Jesus, in His mercy, instead of punishing us for our sins, took the blows that we deserved so that by His wounds our evil is cleansed away.

so that by Him being stricken, we are made clean in the innermost parts. And He was raised from the dead on the third day so that He might grant His resurrection, power, and eternal life to all those who renounce themselves and pledge their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

friends, are you striving in your life to earn a right standing before God? Are you seeking to justify yourself?

[28 : 07] Are you seeking to prove yourself? Instead of seeking to justify yourself, seek the justification of the God who searches your innermost being.

Romans chapter 4, verse 5 says, to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, His faith is counted as righteousness. Your only hope of being counted righteous, of being justified before God is Jesus.

Your only hope of entering the kingdom of God is Jesus. And if you turn to Jesus and if you cling to Him, He will reign over your life with steadfast love and faithfulness forever.