

People of Promise
Solomon
606 words

A Proverbial Promise

Solomon:
Are Proverbs the Same as Promises?

Proverbs 6:20-23

Bible teachers often point out, and correctly so, that the book of Proverbs is to be read and understood differently than, say, Paul's epistles. For instance, when Paul says there is no longer any condemnation resulting from sin for those who are in Christ (Rom. 8:1), that is a didactic proposition--a promise from God--that will never be "not true." On the other hand, when Solomon wrote, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6), that is a "promise" of a different kind. It actually falls more into the "wise advice" category. Knowing the difference between a promise and a "promise" can promote faith and prevent disappointment.

Solomon's proverbial wisdom (wisdom meant "skill" in Hebrew) provides skillful and discerning insights into how to navigate the shallow shoals of life without shipwrecking one's faith in the process. Counting the grains of sand on the seashore would have been easier than measuring Solomon's wisdom (1 Kings 4:29). He was wiser than anyone in the East or in Egypt (4:30), and all the kings of the world sent emissaries to his court just to listen to him speak (4:34). He wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs, and was an expert in botany and zoology (4:32-33). Given Solomon's level of competence, it is easy to see how his proverbs could assume promissory status. Yet modern readers like ourselves treat them more like promises than ancient hearers did.

In the ancient Near East, wise men (sages) occupied recognized roles in society. There were many of them in Israel (4:31), and the book of Proverbs contains some of their wisdom (Prov. 22:17; 24:23; 30:1). "Promises" in those cultures were based more on observable truths, repeated and predictable experiences, and what we might call "common sense," than on unalterable propositions carved in tablets of stone. Therefore, Solomon, in Proverbs 22:6, would say to a parent: "This I can promise you: The wisest way to produce a successful adult is to start training him or her at a young age. No guarantees--but I promise you'll get no better advice than this." Biblical proverbs are not formulas that perform the same way without exception "forever and ever, amen." Rather, they are the collected wisdom of those who observed God and his ways in the world and humans and their way in the world and melded the two into maxims that provide the best chance for skillful and successful living that is available anywhere.

Proverbs are guides, guardians, teachers, lights, and correctors (Prov. 6:22-23). They are so dependable as to be worthy of becoming adornments for our lives; the practice of them makes us attractive to others. In the sense that proverbs are advice from God (it was God who gave Solomon his wisdom; 1 Kings 3:9-13), we should read them

as “promises” with which to address the never-predictable ups and downs of life. The next time you are faced with a life-situation for which the Bible doesn’t offer an iron-clad promise, think of Solomon:

- What is the core value or principle at stake? Solomon has probably addressed it. (Eccl. 1:9)

- Am I willing to step out in faith on godly advice, trusting God to guide me? (Prov. 16:9)

- Can I live in a world of “contingencies,” knowing that if a proverbial “promise” doesn’t come true, God is still in control? (Prov. 16:4a)

Everyone likes neat packages tied up with no loose ends. Unfortunately, life is not always like that. Our willingness to follow sound wisdom, and leave the outcome to God, is a sign of our increasing maturity.