

Pearls from Proverbs

Righteousness Exalts a Nation

Neal Pollard

The book of Proverbs, one of five Old Testament books classified as Hebrew poetry, reads differently than books of historical narrative or literary prophecy. In fact, though it has trademarks of the poetic genre, it reads differently than the majority of poetic books. Solomon, recognized as the penman of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, is noted as the main contributor to this divinely inspired collection of wisdom. Nearly the entire book contains complete thoughts, line by line, that do not adhere to any contextual flow. Elsewhere, the Bible says that Solomon spoke some three thousand proverbs (cf. 1 Kgs. 4:32). Solomon's wisdom was globally acclaimed. Proverbs contains a treasure trove of nuggets of wisdom that many people, even non-believers, readily recognize and even cite. Proverbs 14:34 is one such nugget. It reads, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." [All Scripture references are taken from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.]

There are three inescapable elements involved in this heavenly wisdom. Wherever this proverb applies, these same three elements will be present. Consider them.

A COUNTRY

The verse, in parallel fashion, treats "a nation" and "any people." The one is synonymous with the other. It is

logical to suppose that, contextually, the proverb is primarily concerned with the country of Israel. In this, it only echoes the warnings issued by God from even before the nation was fully formed. In Exodus (23:33), Leviticus (26), Numbers (13-14; 32:13-15), and Deuteronomy (4, 8, 28-30; etc.), God issues repetitive warnings about Israel's absolute need for trust in and obedience to God. Otherwise, Israel would face trouble. By Solomon's day, though he himself was becoming apostate (cf. 1 Kgs. 11:4), his written focus was on warning Israel against abandoning God. Against that backdrop, he speaks of nations and peoples.

Yet, the adjectival use of "any" to modify people clues the reader in to the wider application of the proverb. What Solomon may have spoken with Israel foremost in his mind is equally applicable to countries at any place and time. Wherever nations spring up and form governments to rule people in a given territory, the proverb applies. No nation should think itself exempt from divinely revealed principles, though all nations eventually do. A people must conform to God's blueprint for proper behavior. If it does not, it is made to know at what price it so decides.

A CHOICE

Every nation and people, as a society, must choose its course. Though society is comprised of individuals, each of whom are individually accountable and able to make choices (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10), there are societal trends and norms. What the whole of society comes to accept and follow sooner or later becomes the trend and norm of that society. For example, no doubt not every citizen within the United Soviet Socialist Republic (1917-1989) believed in the principles of godless communism as promulgated by Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, et al. In fact, through efforts by

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gospel preachers such as Bob Hare and Otis Gatewood, the gospel penetrated the walls of the Iron Curtain and spread belief to the hearts of at least a small minority of its citizens during that dark era. Yet, when people thought of the Soviet Union, they thought of communism and humanism. The same would apply to China and North Korea at the present. When one thinks of Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and most of the Middle Eastern nations, he or she is apt to think, "Muslim state." People are characterized by the larger than life attitudes, lifestyles and actions that make up their national reputations.

When the world looks at America, what does it think of our mass mentality? Obviously, not every U.S. citizen adheres to the secular, hedonistic view of Hollywood, the liberal bent of the majority within the judicial branch of government, or the materialistic hunger reflected in the average American's spending habits and resource consumption. Not every American is a godless, selfish and depraved pleasure-monger, though many nations may think of us in this sense.

Whatever society allows and legalizes becomes a matter of national choice. Every state in our nation has chosen to legalize some form of gambling; the horrific practice of abortion; the open, even promiscuous practice of homosexuality; the open, even promiscuous practice of fornication and common law marriage; the easy to obtain, no fault divorce; the free distribution of heinous pornography; and more. Growing pressures to use fetal stem cells for research and to legalize "gay marriage" are real threats on the nearest part of the horizon. Euthanasia is not lagging too far behind these. Evolution has long been taught in public schools, though not even a whisper of creation or Intelligent Design can be legally uttered.

This writer is a confirmed optimist, but it takes Herculean effort to avoid seeing the national choices made by our dear nation. The point, in view of the assigned text, is to reflect upon the verity affirmed by an inspired writer however long ago. If Israel, God's special and chosen people (Deut. 7:6-10) and the very people through whom the world's Messiah came (Acts 2:30-31; Rom. 15:8-12; Gal. 4:4), could not defy this truth and survive (cf. 2 Kgs. 17; 2 Chron. 36), no nation can. Instead, the very choices it honors and those it disdains at some point become the identifying mentality of the entire people. When that occurs, what follows?

That depends upon the choice. Every nation has the ability to choose righteousness as well as sin. Joshua led his house and nation to choose right (cf. Josh. 24:15ff). Our nation feared the God and Christ of the Bible. The decisions borne of that faith gave us a reputation and makeup within the world community. America made choices then, and we are doing so now. So it is with every nation within the world community.

A CONSEQUENCE

The consequence depends upon the choice. The consequence of righteousness is exaltation. The consequence of sin is reproach. However, there are considerations within this framework.

First, there is God's timetable. The Amorites are a good, Biblical example of this factor. In Genesis fifteen, God tells Abram about this wicked nation who would oppress his descendents for a time.

Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But

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I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen. 15:13-16, ESV).

Wickedness is not meted out with instantaneous punishment. When that punishment comes is a matter of God's own reckoning. His timetable is different from man's timetable (cf. Isa. 59:1-2; 2 Pet. 3:8).

Then, there is God's sovereign choice.

Concerning this, man is utterly limited and excluded. We have no basis to judge or even understand how and why God deals with nations and individuals as He does. Habakkuk struggled with this as the more wicked Chaldeans were used by God to exact punishment on Judah (1:4, 13). God acts in accordance with His overarching immutability. That is a realm in which He alone can stand.

Also, there is God's perfect wisdom and justice.

Perhaps, God's sovereign choice is always exacted in view of His limitless character and nature. In other words, maybe God makes even the choices that baffle us concerning nations and men from the standpoint of His perfect view of this world. Abraham's confidence was not misplaced when he averred, "That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25, KJV). Ultimately, no individual or nation can escape the fruit of his or its actions (Gal. 6:7-9). Likewise, God will exonerate righteousness.

Finally, there is God's mitigating longsuffering and forbearance. Jonah did not understand this in the days he was commissioned to preach to Nineveh. He hoped for the destruction of this Assyrian city, but God wanted him to preach to this heathen nation. Jonah could not comprehend why God wanted this, but after a few days of meditation in a dark, isolated location he experienced a change of heart. As the result of Jonah's preaching the powerful message of God, Nineveh repented from the greatest to the least. God forestalled their destruction for a few hundred years, in light of their collective change of heart (cf. Nah. 2:8; 3:7).

Christians are to be found throughout this great nation of ours. The freedoms still currently enjoyed allow us "free course" to spread the good news that will emancipate individuals from spiritual bondage and that can help exalt this nation. As long as we have the gospel, we have hope. Yet, the more we confine and constrain that message, the more readily and swiftly we allow sin to spread unchecked through society. Jesus is the antidote to the reproach. He is the righteous (1 John 2:1). It is what the world – and every nation in it – needs now and always.

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