

Proverbs 31:1-9

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A king recounts what he learned from his mother. She begins to tell her son what it takes to be a person of good character and a noble king.

The final chapter in The Book of Proverbs begins with *the words of King Lemuel*. These words are not original to *Lemuel*; they are recounted from another source: his *mother*. This passage is a transcription of what *King Lemuel* learned from *his mother* (vs 1).

There is no mention of *King Lemuel* anywhere else in Scripture or in any other known historical writings. This is interesting because we have a rather detailed list of the kings of Israel (and Judah). So, if King Lemuel is a literal figure, he is likely the ruler of a foreign land. Melchizedek was king of Jerusalem in Abraham's lifetime, before Israel was a nation, so there were some foreign lands who knew God, although we know little about them. Lemuel could be a foreign ruler and still be a godly king, like Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20).

If *Lemuel* is literal, then this passage would fit into the same category with the testimony of another foreign king, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. His testimony is recorded in Daniel 4:1-3.

The word translated *oracle* in verse 1 is "massa." The Bible cites a person called Massa (listed in Genesis 25:14 and 1 Chronicles 1:30) who is a descendant of Ishmael and Hagar. This person may have settled and developed a region bearing his name. So, rather than "...*King Lemuel, the oracle*," the translation could read, "King Lemuel of Massa."

Another possibility is that this is a pen name; some have suggested Solomon is here referring to himself. This would make Bathsheba the source of the wisdom taught in this chapter. *Lemuel* means "for God" in Hebrew, and could be a nickname for Solomon, saying that he was a man that was "for God."

Of course the name Lemuel meaning "for God" or "belonging to God" could apply other ways as well. Another option is that *King Lemuel* is a sort of metaphorical king, representing those who choose to honor God with their lives. That would make the opening to this chapter similar to Luke's use of "Theophilus" ([see commentary on Acts 1:1-5](#)).

Massa, which is translated *oracle* in the NASB and "utterance" in the NKJV, is often translated as "prophecy." It literally means "burden," something one has to carry—a metaphor for responsibility. To have knowledge of the truth, and what actually works in life, creates responsibility; we know better.

King Lemuel was given this *oracle*/responsibility by *his mother*. She taught him the ways of wisdom and it is that which he relays here. This is consistent with the entirety of The Book of Proverbs, where wisdom is personified as a woman.

The eight verses that follow consist of what Lemuel's mother *taught him* (vs 1). The word for *taught* is "yasar," which means "chastise" or "correct." So, this is instruction that pulls *Lemuel* from the wrong course and onto the right one. It is a teaching that is meant to contrast and overturn falsity.

Lemuel's mother begins by expressing her affection for her child in three ways. She does this by asking a set of rhetorical questions. Each of the three questions consists of only one word, *what?*

What, O my son?

And what, O son of my womb?

And what, O son of my vows? (vs 2)

This is meant to be generally interrogative. As if to say, "*What do you say?*", "*What matters?*", or "*What is life about?*" These are mostly devices to get Lemuel's attention, to stir him up to consider his agency to make choices. The questions are also a device to allow her to express her affections to her son.

The first rhetorical question is short and sweet: *What, O my son?* This initial question addresses *Lemuel* in terms of his standing and identity. He is connected to her in relationship, status, inheritance, and all of the ways a *son* is connected to a mother.

The second is an extension of the first: *And what, O son of my womb?* She is asking the same rhetorical question again, but this time addressing him in terms of his connection to her physical body. He is her physical offspring.

The third question is, *And what, O son of my vows?* A vow is a *promise*. A commitment. Presumably, this woman has made a commitment to pursue the truth—*vows* to uphold wisdom. As her *son*, he is the inheritor of these *vows*. The promises she makes inform how he is reared.

This could also refer to a vow the mother made before getting pregnant, something along the lines of, "If you give me this baby, I will teach him about God." This was not uncommon at the time (one example is found in 1 Samuel 1:11). The point is that there is a spiritual and moral connection between mother and son. They are linked by relationship, physically, and spiritually.

The mother proceeds to give her son advice on what it means to live well. How to exercise wisdom. In the verses of this section, she gives him two things to avoid and one to pursue.

The first thing to avoid is sexual and romantic obsession. When the mother says, *Do not give your strength to women* (vs 3), this is not a commentary on the value or danger of women but on the male tendency toward sexual obsession. The word for *strength* ("hayil") is the Hebrew word often translated "army." A man's *strength* is in his discernment, the stewardship of his own character. The mother is pleading with Lemuel not to forfeit his character for the sake of infatuation. All too often, this is a path that *destroys kings*. And men in general, of course.

Throughout all of Proverbs, there is a clear invitation to choose the path of wisdom over the path of foolishness. The *ways* of sexual/romantic obsession fall under the latter path and, therefore, ought to be avoided, lest it destroy (literally “blot out”) our opportunities.

This is all very ironic because Solomon ends up falling into this very temptation later in life (1 Kings 11:4). His father, King David, suffered a similar downfall (2 Samuel 11-12).

The second thing to avoid has the same sort of danger as the first. Lemuel’s mother says twice that *it is not for kings*. Repetition in the Hebrew language is a method of emphasis. The mother really wants *Lemuel* to pay attention to this. She addresses *Lemuel* by name. *It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine* (v 4). As any young child knows, when a parent addresses their child by name, it is because they mean business. She exercises repetition once again to exhort her son that it is bad *for rulers to desire strong drink*. The repetition is given in order to emphasize the importance of this warning.

Substance abuse and dependence is another temptation that draws people away from the path of wisdom and into wickedness. This is especially dangerous for those who are stewarding influence over others (which, really, is all of us), because it erodes our impact, undermines our efforts, and derails our missions.

The *mother* gives *Lemuel* two examples of how *drink* can harm the efforts of a king. The first is *they will drink and forget what is decreed* (v 5). The phrase *what is decreed* is a translation of one Hebrew word, “haqqaq.” It is an interesting term. Sometimes it is translated as the thing that is produced (law, most often). The word is sometimes translated as the promise for what is to be done, a decree—such as in Proverbs 8:29, “When he gave to the sea his decree (‘haqqaq’)...”

And sometimes it is translated as the person producing the thing (i.e. lawgiver or governor)—such as in Isaiah 33:22, “For the Lord is our Judge, the Lord is our lawgiver (‘haqqaq’), the Lord is our king.” So “haqqaq” (*decreed*) can mean either the thing, or the person who made the thing. Likely here it has a double meaning. The alcohol-abusing ruler is forgetting both the law itself as well as the maker of laws, God.

This double meaning could also refer to the king who made the law forgetting about the law he made, leading him to be arbitrary, putting himself and his own drug-induced impulses above sound judgement and rule of law. When God established Israel, He founded it upon the rule of Law, establishing a covenant/treaty with His people, which they agreed to abide by (Exodus 19:8). When a ruler puts himself above the law, he is not following the path God intended.

So, the failing of the king in this example is forgetting what is right. Both in terms of the practical manifestations and the God who designed it all. Alcoholic drink clouds a person’s ability to remember and to discern.

The next warning is about what happens in the wake of forgetting what is right—and *pervert the rights of all the afflicted* (v 5). When a ruler forgets what is lawful and who is the true arbiter of goodness, he will start to fill in the gaps with his own flesh. He will try to take the place of God. This is a perversion. *The rights of the afflicted* will be violated as a result. The king will not seek

justice for those whom he serves. Rather he will seek to exploit those around him to serve his own appetites.

In these two examples, the king is quickly off course. *Drink* has led him astray. He has *forgotten* what is right and turned to perversion.

The mother is suggesting that strong drink can poison one's life and lead them down a wrong path. So, she suggests the drinking be left to those who are already on the wrong path. *Give strong drink to him who is perishing* (v 6).

Sometimes, in the ancient world, a person condemned to death was offered a drink that was meant to dull the senses to make the torture more tolerable. This is what is offered to Jesus on the cross, but He refuses (Matthew 27:34; Mark 15:23).

This is a sort of parable. The mother is saying, a little facetiously, "If you are going to give a poison to anyone, give to someone who has already injected poison." Someone who is *perishing* already. Do not give *wine* to a king who is trying to steward his character well, give it to him *whose life is bitter* (v 6). Drink does not belong to those who are trying to stay on the path of goodness. It is intended to try to dull the senses of those who have already given themselves over to a *bitter* life.

The mother suggests, *let him drink and forget his poverty and remember his trouble no more* (v 7). This could be intended as practical advice, such as a person taking pain killers at the end of their life. Or it could be a sort of taunting, hyperbolic suggestion, indicating that anyone who indulges in drunkenness is doing so in an attempt to escape the reality of their circumstances. Of course, even for a perishing or bitter person, strong drink does not change the circumstances, and only compounds the problem. Perhaps the point is to say "If you are indulging in strong drink you are refusing to face reality, and sinking further into poverty and bitterness."

The drink might cause some semblance of a temporary relief, but will add adverse consequences as well, far outweighing the temporary relief.

The point the mother appears to be making is that addictive behavior belongs far from the king, miles from one striving to do good and steward an impact on the world. "If you want to live a constructive life, then stay away from drugs and alcohol" might be a modern version of this motherly admonition.

So, these are the two things the mother warns against: obsession with women and strong drink. Now, she tells Lemuel the one thing he ought to do. Namely, to serve others. As king, Lemuel will be tempted by wine and women. He will have to decide if he wants to pursue personal, superficial gain that will lead to his ruin or if he wants to steward his authority towards helping those who need it most. It is the latter that leads to true happiness.

The mother advocates servant leadership in a few ways. The first is to *open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate* (v 8). A *mute* person is one who is unable to talk. This is, of course, a literal physical deformity. It is also a metaphor that is used for those who do not have a voice. So, if the king is meeting with his advisors, a poor merchant is not going to have a voice in that room—unless the king (or an advisor) *opens* his *mouth* on their behalf.

When someone is accused of a crime, they need an advocate (like a lawyer) to help speak on their behalf. The mother urges Lemuel to speak *for the rights of all the unfortunate*. The Hebrew word translated *all the unfortunate* is “halop.” It literally means “those who are passing away.” They are heading for destruction, unless someone intervenes on their behalf. The mother is suggesting the king ought to be this kind of person, one who *opens* his *mouth* and intercedes for those in need of help in order to gain justice.

She reiterates that the king ought to *open* his *mouth*. She is encouraging him to be active, to intentionally steward his influence. This second encouragement to open your mouth is followed by two phrases: *judge righteously and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy* (v 9). As king, a person with influence, Lemuel will not only be able to speak on behalf of those who are in need; he will also be able to pass judgments. She wants her son to *judge righteously*. Do not go out of bounds of what is right.

She then tells him to *defend the rights of the afflicted and needy*. The mother does not say anything about the treasury, military might, or expanding territory. Her sole concern for her son as a politician and civic leader seems to be that he consider and care for the true benefit of others.

It is also important to note that this care for the *afflicted and needy* is aimed at their true welfare. It is not aimed at gaining political power through buying their affection. Lemuel’s mother is seeking for her son to live in a manner to please the True King, who commanded that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37-39).

Biblical Text

The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him

²What, O my son? And what, O son of my womb? And what, O son of my vows?

³Do not give your strength to women, Or your ways to that which destroys kings.

⁴It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, Or for rulers to desire strong drink

⁵For they will drink and forget what is decreed, And pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

⁶Give strong drink to him who is perishing, And wine to him whose life is bitter.

⁷Let him drink and forget his poverty. And remember his trouble no more.

⁸Open your mouth for the mute, For the rights of all the unfortunate.

⁹Open your mouth, judge righteously, And defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.