

Prayer

Give us a heart to sing our praises to You, Lord God. May our souls overflow with hymns and songs of love and worship; and as we sing, help us to remember the great truths of our Christian heritage which they convey. Join us together across the centuries with those who have sung 'How great thou art' and 'Love divine', and open our hearts to sing with every fibre of our being. All praise be to You, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Faith's journey

Pray for the Church whilst, in many places, it seeks to be more effective in its work for the Kingdom of God. Pray for believers to work together with purpose and in unity

On-going prayers

- *Pray for celebrities who are in the public eye at the moment*
- *Give thanks to God the joy and beauty of gardens and flowers*
- *Pray for young couples who are striving to bear children*

Meditation

You, O Lord, do not change Your mind about all the people You have made;
Your love does not change.

You will never go back on Your Word, and You accept us through Jesus Christ;
Your mercy does not change.

You do not accept rebellion and sin, for Your Kingdom is a place of perfection;
Your judgement does not change.

You act against the enemy and respond to those who call on Your name;
Your protection does not change.

You work in miraculous power to show the truth about Your Kingdom;
Your power does not change,

You always seek to draw all things to their perfect conclusion, in Your time;
Your purposes do not change,

Your character, Lord God, is unchanging; but when we first turn to You in faith,
Your justice changes to mercy!

You accept us because of Jesus, and our lives are changed forever.

Bible Study - Proverbs 2:16-22

¹⁶ *Wisdom will save you from the loose woman, from the adulteress with her words of flattery* ¹⁷ *who has left the partner of her youth and ignores her marriage covenant made before God;* ¹⁸ *for her house opens up a way to death, and her paths lead to the departed;* ¹⁹ *those who go to her never come back, and they do not regain the paths of life.*

²⁰ *So walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the righteous.* ²¹ *For the upright will live in the land, and the innocent will remain there;* ²² *but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the faithless will be rooted out of it.*

Review

The subject of this passage in Proverbs is sex. Suddenly, and without any prior hint, wisdom speaks to us directly about one of the sins of the Ten Commandments; adultery. It is a sin that affects large numbers of people, far more than we suppose, and is mostly hidden away from public view. How and why does it appear in Proverbs now? Up to this point in the book of Proverbs, the writer has introduced the subject of wisdom, eventually characterising her as a woman (1:20f.), who calls out to people to accept her 'teaching' (1:23f.). At the beginning of chapter 2, Wisdom continues to speak, imploring young people to accept what she says, to 'understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God' (2:5). She also pleads for evil to be rejected, to avoid 'the ways of darkness' (2:13), and it is then that she declares the sexual advice we read in today's passage. (Please note that the Hebrew begins 'You will be saved from the loose woman ...', but I have added 'Wisdom will save you' at the beginning so that the sentence makes sense, and because the whole section is a speech by, and about, 'Wisdom').

Sex and life

Today, we often rationalise sexual matters as something to do with a person's 'private life', and quite separate from general working life. How often have you heard the phrase 'what you do in your private life is your own business' when the subject of sex is referred to in conversation? Well, according to the book of Proverbs, sex it is not just a private matter because it has implications for the whole of life! In this passage, Wisdom appeals to the young people being taught (see 2:1) to recognise that sexual matters are related to general behaviour, which is the general theme of the passage. You cannot pretend to live what purports to be a 'good' life and also keep a secret life of sexual shame through adultery (or other sexual sin).

Sexual misdemeanour breaks up good life

All this is explained by this passage in this way. The person who pursues wisdom, truth and integrity (2:2,3), and also justice and the righteousness of God (2:6,7), will find that their 'path of life' gives them protection from evil in the world (2:11,12). Moreover, Wisdom goes on to say that this path will also save a good person 'from the loose woman' (2:16) meaning 'temptation to adultery'. Conversely, giving in to sexual temptation is the first step towards rebellion against God's ways, and it is interesting that although the writer of this passage could have referred to the legal prohibition of adultery in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:14), what is said is a moral and spiritual argument rather than a legal one. Adultery is the breakdown of the 'marriage covenant' between man and woman, indicated strongly in the great story of Creation (Genesis 1:26,27, and 2:18-25); and the breach of this covenant opens up the way for evil to draw a person down its own deathly pathway (2:18,19). Scripture does not say any more about how this happens in real life, but may regard it as common knowledge. Today, many a TV play or Hollywood movie explains how an intricate web of jealousy, covetousness and greed forms around adultery, leading to the downfall of people who might otherwise be regarded as good. Moreover, when the truth is finally told, life can become very messy!

Sexual temptation disrupts the aspiration of marriage

This passage of Scripture paints a bleak picture of adultery, and the figure of a 'loose woman' engaged in the temptations of adultery is a generalisation that represents all manner of sexual deviancy. Sexual temptation in its different forms frequently begins with the manner in which young people first become sexually aroused or aware, and Wisdom appreciates that young people need sound teaching that identifies the covenant of marriage as the only secure home for sexual expression. Without this, the young can easily go

astray before marriage and consequently find marriage far more difficult than God intends. We will find more about this subject in later passages of 'Proverbs'.

The contrast between the prospects of those who pursue Wisdom (2:20,21) and the fate of those who reject it and succumb to sexual deviancy is stark (2:19,22). The 'possession of the land' (2:21) obtained by those who follow Wisdom's advice is also a generalisation which means 'the blessings of God'; and in the end, we either live in God's presence, or are cut off from Him by the consequences of our own choices and actions. In all this, sex is of course important because it is the means whereby the generations are continually reproduced, and much of Israel's self understanding is about continuity across the generations. Sexuality and the inheritance of faith under God are therefore inextricably mixed, whatever people may say to pretend that the opposite is true!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What sexual deviancies pose the greatest threat to society; those that are talked about most, for example, paedophilia, or those that are not, like adultery?
2. What message can the church give to those whose lives are caught up in sexual matters such as adultery?
3. Discuss the blessings of God that come to those who keep to His ways of sexual purity within marriage?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Some most learned and respected Christian people have difficulty with sexual issues. The number of marriages of Christian ministers that have broken up because of adultery is evidence of this. If you have a problem with some sexual matters or behaviour, then do make it a priority in your prayer life. You need to find God's answers to your problems, because the enemy will use every means to trap you and keep you from receiving the full blessings that God has for you now, and in the future.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If possible, use a Bible dictionary to look up what the Bible says about various forms of sexual deviancy, adultery and the like. Is there anything there that you find surprising? If so, discuss this with others and try to find some understanding of these issues which you believe to represent the mind of God.*
- *Pray for those who are trapped in loveless marriages, and do not know how to find ways of being liberated without breaking God's laws as they are perceived. Pray that God's love may be applied to those who need it in such circumstances, through the real pastoral care of the church.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ. We pray to You each day with confidence that You are leading us and guiding us; and yet when little seems to happen, we wonder whether You are really at work. Come by Your Holy Spirit to expose our sins so that we may deal with them, and then empower us to do Your will, whatever it may be. AMEN