

-Save This Page as a PDF-

Justice is a Joy to the Righteous 20:29 to 21:31

A proverb is a short and memorable saying designed to be our blueprint for living in the world that ADONAI has created. It is important to note that proverbs are not promises; they are generally true principles, all other things being equal.

Introduction (20:29 to 21:2): The educational introduction focuses on the instructive relationship of the **older** generation (**the wise**) to **the younger** generation (**strong young men**), implying that **the wise** need to educate **the youth**, who are basically hormones with legs. Hard blows, **their** teaching method, rather than verbal rebukes, may be featured here because the main body pertains mostly to **the wicked** types who need hard blows in **their youth** to save **them** from death.⁴¹³

The pride of the young men is their strength; the dignity of the old is gray hair (20:29 CJB). Here we find the mutual dependence of the generations on each other by featuring **their** splendors, **the strength** of **the youth** and **the wisdom** of **the aged**. **Youthful vigor** has been replaced with something that, certainly within the context of the book of **Proverbs**, is considered more important: **wisdom**. The latter is indicated by the reference to **gray hair**. The reason it was respected in antiquity was that, all things being equal, it meant that a person had matured and was wiser than a youth. Experience would have led to advanced knowledge, and the very fact of surviving to old age meant that life strategies were successful. That all things are not always equal was certainly known in biblical times, as demonstrated by **the three friends** of **Job**. **They** are advanced in years and indeed often bolster **their** arguments by bragging about **their age (Job 15:7-10)**, offering **foolish** arguments. Since the second colon intensifies the first, we can understand **the proverb** as saying something good (**young men in their strength**) is being replaced by something better (**gray hair** and **wisdom**).

Physical punishment cleanses away evil; such discipline purifies the heart (20:30 NLT). **Proverbs** does not shrink from physical punishment to support

gaining **wisdom** and the related avoidance of **evil** (**to see link click Cf - Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child**). Though **the proverb** may be considered harsh, it does not imply that a person would be seriously hurt. Indeed, it is obvious that **evil** flourishes among a generation raised on the advice to avoid **physical punishment**, like spanking, calls into question whether child-rearing strategies today are more beneficial than biblical **wisdom**. **The proverb** claims that **physical punishment** does more than produce outward conformity; it also **purifies the heart**.

The king's heart in ADONAI's hand is a canal of water, He turns it wherever He pleases (21:1 Hebrew). **The king** was a powerful person in ancient **Israelite** society., but this **proverb** teaches us that even this powerful figure is subservient to the will of **YHVH**. The modern equivalent to the image of a **stream of water in ADONAI's hand** would be to say that **the king** is *putty in the hands of God*. That **Ha'Shem** does not always incline **the king** in the direction of **righteousness** can be illustrated by the case of **Pharaoh** in the book of **Exodus**. There, **ADONAI hardens his heart** (see the commentary on **Exodus Bi - Throw Your Staff Before Pharaoh and It Will Become a Snake**). This is not to be understood as making **Pharaoh** do **evil**; rather, it confirms an attitude that was already there. Yet, since water brought fertility, this image may mean that **God** predisposes **the king** in good directions. In support of this, chaotic waters are representative of chaos and hostility, so **channeled water** means bringing those chaotic forces under control.⁴¹⁴

Every man's path is right in his own eyes, but ADONAI weighs the hearts (21:2 Hebrew). This **proverb** is a variant of **16:2: All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but ADONAI weighs the spirits. Right** (or **upright**) means about the same thing as **pure**, and **hearts** is synonymous with **spirits** in this context. The act of weighing, found in both sayings, is often compared with Egyptian hieroglyphics that picture the human heart being weighed on one scale of the balance against the feather of truth on the other (see the commentary on **Exodus Bc - Pharaoh as god and upholder of Ma'at**). The Hebrew concept is less mechanical and more personal.⁴¹⁵ Human beings are not the final judges of the righteousness of their own actions: **ADONAI** is; human beings do not define standards of virtue: **ADONAI** does. The path metaphor stands for one's life direction here and is pervasive throughout the book of **Proverbs**.



The main body: Justice is a joy to the righteous

(21:3-29): The main body consists of a janus introduction stating the unit's main theme (verse 3), followed by **three subunits (verses 4-8, 10-18, and 20-29)** separated by the catchphrase about **the nagging wife in verses 9 and 19** (also see **Cs - Closer than a Brother: Wisdom in the home**). The first subunit focuses on the defeat of **the wicked**; the middle subunit, on the triumph of **the righteous over them**; and the last subunit focuses on the lasting establishment of **the righteous** and the demise of **the wicked**. The key word **wicked** acts like bookends (**21:4b** and **21:29a**).⁴¹⁶

Janus: ADONAI's desire for righteousness and justice: To do what is right and just is more desired by ADONAI than sacrifice (21:3 Hebrew). This verse is a janus, named after the Roman god of endings and beginnings, symbolized by having two faces - one looking back toward the past and one looking forward toward the future. Thus, **verse 3** forms a janus between **the introduction** and **the main body** in **verses 4-20**. Like **"better-than" proverbs** (among others see **16:19** and **32, 17:1, 19:22, 22:1, 24:5, 27:5, 28:6** and **23**), this **proverb** presents relative values. To be sure, **YHVH** loves **sacrifice**, but more so **righteousness** and **justice**. Indeed, it might be argued from this **proverb** and elsewhere (**Isaiah 1:11-17; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8; and First Samuel 15:22**) that **sacrifice** without **righteousness** without **justice** is worthless. **The proverb** does not define **righteousness** and **justice**, but since both concepts are closely connected to **wisdom**, the book may be said to define **it**.⁴¹⁷

(1) An analysis of the wicked person's pursuit of wealth (21:4-8):

Haughty eyes and a proud heart, pride is the lamp of the wicked, that is, it is **x** very life (**21:4 Hebrew**). Certainly, there is nothing obscure about the connection between **pride**, on the one hand, and **wickedness** and **sin**, on the other. **Pride**, putting itself first, leads to **sin** and, as John Calvin

(1509-1564) would state, is the fertile ground for all other **sins**. In contrast to the description of **the wicked** as those with **haughty eyes** and **prideful hearts**, we think of **the psalmist's** cry: **ADONAI, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty (Psalm 131:1a)**.

Good planning and hard work lead to prosperity, but hasty shortcuts lead to poverty (21:5 NLT). When those who are determined have their eyes on a goal; they are able to make decisions and devise plans. This can be contrasted with those who take **hasty shortcuts**, which in this context must mean something like being impulsive. **Proverbs** frequently criticizes those who make quick decisions, not thinking about the future. The results of these two courses of action are contrasted in terms of **prosperity** and **poverty**.

A fortune gained by a lying tongue is meaningless and a deadly snare (21:6 NIV). **Proverbs** is not against acquiring **wealth**, but it must be done with honesty and hard work (see **Be - Don't be Lazy**). **Lying to get rich (6:16-19, 25:18)** is consistently condemned (**22:16**). Here **the proverb** cuts to the reality of the situation. **Liars** think **they** are going after material possessions, but what **they** will gain is merely a **meaningless** life and ultimately **death**.

The violence of the wicked will drag them away, for they refuse to act with justice (21:7 NIV). **Wicked people** do not act with **justice** and thus harm those who are innocent. They act this way to get the advantage over others, but this **proverb** points out that they themselves will meet a tragic end. **Violence** produces **violence**. This **proverb** can serve as a warning against **violent** behavior without cause or comfort those who are victims of **their violence**.⁴¹⁸

The guilty walk a crooked path; but the upright travel a straight path (21:8 NIV). This verse brings the first subunit to its conclusion, contrasting **the proud (verse 4)**, **the hasty (verse 5)**, **the liar (verse 6)**, and **the violent (verse 7)** with **God's** evaluation, guilty, demanding **their** judgment. **They** are recognized by **their crooked path (Isaiah 53:6)**; indeed, **a straight path** is an abomination to **them (29:27b)**. The conduct of the innocent is **upright**; this is the antithesis of **the deceitfulness of the wicked**.⁴¹⁹

Janus: the nagging wife (21:9): It's better to live alone in the corner of an

attic than with a nagging wife (21:9 CJB). Thus, **verse 9** forms a janus between **the analysis of the wicked person's pursuit of wealth** and **the righteous triumph over the wicked** in **verses 10-18**. By the dramatic switch from **wicked** types of men to **the nagging wife**, a sharp division is formed between the body's subunits.

(2) The righteous triumph over the wicked (21:10-18): Evil people desire evil; they get no mercy from them (21:10 NLT). This **proverb** helps us understand the psychology of **the wicked**. **These** are not **people** who occasionally do bad things; **they** habitually act in bad ways. Thus, the second colon is not surprising. **They** do not give **their** neighbors any **mercy**. If their neighbors stand in the way of the fulfillment of **their wickedness**, to which **they** are addicted, then the neighbors will suffer **their wrath**.

When a mocker is punished, the simple gain wisdom; but when the wise are instructed, they receive knowledge (21:11 Hebrew). The point of this proverb is both clear and interesting. It basically makes the point that the punishment of **a mocker** – though it will do no good for **the mocker**, who by definition does not respond to criticism or punishment – may help a third party, the immature or simpleminded, who sees it and responds. In the second colon, it is a bit unclear exactly whose knowledge increases, whether otherwise people, the simpleminded, or both. **If you punish a mocker, the simpleminded will learn a lesson; if you correct the wise, they will be all the wiser (19:25 NLT).**

The Righteous One observes the house of the wicked and brings them to ruin (21:12 Hebrew). One of the most important questions to ask concerning this **proverb** is the identity of **the "righteous."** Most commentators believe that the reference is to **ADONAI**, who is **"the Righteous One,"** and this may well be true. However, there is nothing in **the proverb** that makes this interpretation certain, and it could refer to **a "righteous" person**. After all, both **God** and **righteous people** might keep **their eye** on **the wicked** and do their best to **bring their plans to ruin**. But, it is true that such a picture of **the righteous** as scheming gossips is not too flattering, so perhaps it is best to think of the actor as **God Himself**.

Those who shut their ears to the cries of the poor will be ignored in their time of need (21:13 NLT). In a reversal of the biblical verse: **Treat others how you want them to treat you (Matthew 7:12a; Luke 6:31a)**

NCV), this **proverb** basically says, “Others will treat you like you treat them.” If people do not respond to calls for help, then when they are in trouble, no one will help them. This **proverb** is a call to be sensitive **to the cries of the poor**. It fits with others that show a concern for those in need (**22:2; 28:27; 29:7** and **14**).

A secret gift calms anger; a bribe under the table pacifies fury (21:14 NLT). The teaching on **gifts/bribes** is hard to synthesize in the book of **Proverbs**. Here, both **the gift** and **the bribe** are most naturally understood in a positive manner; elsewhere the idea of **the bribe** is frowned upon as distorting **justice** (also see **Exodus 23:8; Deuteronomy 16:19, 27:25; Psalm 15:5; Ecclesiastes 7:7; Isaiah 1:23** and **5:23; Ezekiel 22:12**). It may be a matter of right time and right place for a “**bribe**.” Perhaps if the motive is good and it does not pervert **justice**, a “**bribe**” might be considered the right thing to do. Indeed, one can imagine scenarios where a “**bribe**” might actually allow **justice** to be carried out.⁴²⁰

Justice is a joy to the righteous, but terror to those who do evil (21:15 Hebrew). After the two negative **proverbs** about **injustice**; that is, refusing to hear **the cry of the poor (verse 13)** but being pacified by a **bribe (verse 14)**, **verse 15** returns to the positive theme of the subunit. **Justice** will be done, bringing **joy** to **the righteous** and **terror** to **the wicked**. After all, **justice** implies reward for **the righteous** and punishment as the consequence of **evil** deeds. **Their** use of violence and deception against society’s weaker members results in **their** own destruction, a process that **they themselves** had begun. In the final analysis, it has to be said that **justice comes from ADONAI (29:26b NLT)**.⁴²¹

The one who wanders from the path of prudence (1:4a) will end up in the company of the dead (21:16 Hebrew). Throughout **Proverbs**, but especially in the first **nine chapters**, the metaphor of **the path** is widespread. There are essentially two **paths**. First, **the path of wisdom** (see **Am - Lady Wisdom’s Rebuke of the Foolish**) is **straight** and protected by **ADONAI**; the second is **the crooked path of folly** (see **Bo - Madam Folly’s Invitation to Death**). One might respond by saying that everyone, **wise** and **foolish**, ends up dead. At a minimum, this **proverb** suggests that **fools** are more likely to **die** early as a result of **their foolish** decisions. However, **the proverb** may imply more, though a doctrine of the afterlife is not fully developed here.

Those who love pleasure become poor; those who love wine and oil will never be rich (21:17 Hebrew). Proverbs identifies a number of causes of **poverty**. Certainly, the most common cause is laziness, but here another reason is given: living above **their** means. The first colon is a general statement about the pursuit of pleasure leading to poverty. The second colon refers to celebrations or feasts, what today we might call “parties.” **The oil** would be used to lubricate the skin of the guests, while **the wine** would be used to lubricate their throats. The Bible is not opposed to drinking **wine**, but condemns **drunkenness** and **its** effects (see [Db - An Obedient Son: Regarding too much wine](#)).⁴²²

The wicked become a ransom for the righteous, and the treacherous for the upright (21:18 Hebrew). The synonymous lines of the proverb put across a single point: What wicked or **treacherous** plots for a **righteous** and **upright** person returns as **his** own fate. **He**, in fact, becomes **a ransom**, that is, a substitute (Hebrew: *kopher*, meaning *atonement* as in **Exodus 21:30**) for **his** intended victim. So turn the wheels of divine justice, as when **Haman** learned **his** fate (see the commentary on [Esther Bf - So They Impaled Haman on the Pole He Had Set Up for Mordecai](#)). [Rashi first used Esther 7:10 as an illustration of this proverb.](#)⁴²³

Janus: the nagging wife (21:19): Better to live in the desert than with a nagging, angry wife (21:19 Hebrew). The “better-than” structure of this **proverb** – its thought of **a nagging wife** destroying the marriage, and its function of dividing subunits – repeats **verse 9**. This subunit contrasts **the long-life of the righteous** with **the death of the wicked**. Thus, **verse 19** forms a janus between **the righteous triumph over the wicked** and **the endurance of the righteous versus the death of the wicked** in **verses 20-29**.

(3) The long-life of the righteous versus the death of the wicked (21:20-29): The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp theirs down (21:20 NIV). The catchword “oil,” the symbol of wealth and luxury, links **verse 20** with **verse 17**, contrasting respectively **the wicked person’s** loss with **the wise person’s** gain. **The proverb** is also connected with **verse 19** by comparing and contrasting **living in a desert** with living in a “pasture.” Its opposing parallels, contrasting **the wise person’s** continual abundance (**3:16, 8:18** and **21, 10:4, 12:11, 24:4, and 28:19**) with **the fool’s** desire for instant gratification.

He who pursues righteousness and lovingkindness, finds life, prosperity and honor (21:21 CJB). It is important to note that **proverbs** are not promises, **they** are generally true principles. All things being equal, those **who pursue righteousness and kindness** will find **life**. **Righteousness and lovingkindness** (see the commentary on **Ruth Af - The Concept of Chesed**) are closely related to **wisdom**, so pursuit of these qualities are at least a part of following **the path of wisdom** that is laid out in this book. This is why **the wise person's** home is continually filled with **grain and oil, prosperity and social honor (Proverbs 3:2-10, 8:18; Matthew 5:6 and 10:42; Luke 6:38; and Hebrews 6;10).**⁴²⁴

Paul may have had **Proverbs 21:21** in mind when **he** said: **To those who seek glory, honor, and immortality by perseverance in doing good, ADONAI will pay back [with] eternal life (Romans 2:7 CJB).** Some might misunderstand **Paul** to mean that **eternal life** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**) is obtained on the condition of **perseverance in doing good**. In reality, **Paul** is describing the kind of people who are rewarded with **eternal life**. Believers, though still having their old sin nature, are changed in such a way that they seek glory and immortality in a life lived for **Yeshua Messiah**. **Good** deeds are the proof of salvation, not the means to it.⁴²⁵

One who is wise can go up against the city of the mighty and pull down the stronghold in which they trust (21:22 NIV). **Wisdom** is better than strength. How could this be? Most likely this **proverb** is thinking of strategies devised by those who brilliantly lead to the defeat of **a strong city**. All the brute force in the world is fruitless unless guided in the right direction by **wisdom**.⁴²⁶ October 12, 539 BC, **king Belshazzar** of Babylon made the fatal error of withdrawing the watchmen from their positions on the city wall. Therefore, **when the Medo-Persian king Darius** attacked, no one was there to defend **the city**. Because the Euphrates River encircled the city, the majority of the residents thought **Babylon's** massive walls, being 320 feet tall and 80 feet thick, were impenetrable. However, the **Persian** army devised an ingenious plan to redirect the river further upstream, thereby reducing the water to a more manageable level. The **Persian** soldiers were able to cross the river and enter **the city** by wading into the riverbed underneath the wall during **Belshazzar's** banquet (see the commentary on **Dani'el Ct - Belshazzar was Killed**).⁴²⁷

Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps himself out of trouble (21:23 CJB). The tongue is a powerful force for **good** or **evil**. The misuse of the tongue can **set the whole course of one's life on fire (James 3:6b)**. Additionally, there are hidden dangers of the tongue that do not come from **evil** intentions. Speaking the truth at an inappropriate time can be just as harmful as telling a lie. This verse reminds us that most of our opinions don't need to be expressed, and that criticism is not always valuable. Even with good intentions, we may harm others or ourselves by what we say.⁴²⁸

Mockers are proud and haughty; they act with excessive pride (21:24 Hebrew). This proverb defines what makes **a mocker a mocker: pride**. **Pride** causes **mockers** to look at others and make fun of them. Specifically, when **they themselves** are criticized, rather than taking an inward look and changing for the better, **they** defend **themselves** by ridiculing those who are pointing out **their** weaknesses.⁴²⁹

A lazy person's desire will kill them, because they refuse to work (21:25 Hebrew). The longings of a **lazy person** do not include **work** (see [Dk - The Lazy Person](#)). But without work there is no home, no crops, nothing to eat. Therefore, the desire of **the lazy will kill them**. This proverb is true, all things being equal. But all things are not always equal. Sometimes people will help out the **lazy** so they survive. However, according to **Paul's** advice to **the Thessalonians 3:10: If you will not work, you will not eat.**

All day long they crave for more, but the righteous do not hold back (21:26 Hebrew). The point of **the proverb** seems to be that everyone has cravings for things for themselves; more and more food, possessions, luxuries, and a better place to live. However, what distinguishes the righteous person from others is that these longings can be redirected, and a self-centered person may become an other-directed person. The righteous of the TaNaKh do not hesitate to share their wealth. It is not a matter of meeting one's own personal desires (which will never end), but becoming more generous. It is interesting to read **verses 25** and **26** together. **Verse 25** points out that longings are necessary for survival, but **verse 26** warns us that uncontrolled longings are harmful.

The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable. It is important to understand that there was no permanent atonement for **sin** in the Dispensation of **Torah** (see the commentary on **Exodus**, to see link click [Da - The Dispensation of](#)

Torah), only a temporary **covering** offered in faith. In **Psalm 32:1**, **David** said: **How blessed are those whose offense is forgiven, those whose sin is covered.** A sacrifice offered while just going through the motions was **detestable** to **ADONAI**, just like going through the motions of going to church would be today (sitting in the garage doesn't make you a car; therefore, sitting in a Messianic congregation on Saturday, or sitting in church on Sunday, doesn't make you a believer). **How much more so when brought with evil intent (21:27 NIV).**

A false witness will be cut off, but a credible witness will be allowed to speak forever (21:28 NLT). The proverb fits in with the pervasive theme in the book of **Proverbs** that condemns the false witness and promotes telling the truth in legal proceedings (**19:28, 24:28-29, 25:8** and **18, 29:24**). The contrast seems to be between the silencing of the false witness, but listening to the one who listens, pays attention, and reports the truth.

The wicked put on a brazen face, but the upright establish their path (21:29 Hebrew). The phrase **brazen face** (Hebrew: *azaz*) is also used in **7:13-14a** for the **adulterous woman** when **she seduces** a man who is not **her husband**, even in the context of making a **peace offering**. It is also used as **fierce-looking** (Hebrew: *az*) in **Dani'el 8:23-24** in reference to a future king, usually identified as **Antiochus Epiphanes**, who will fight against **the people of Isra'el** and against **God Himself**. It is clear that these phrases are associated with horrible **evil**. In contrast to this, **the upright** have a clear **path**, a metaphor that is used extensively in **Proverbs**, standing for the journey of life.⁴³⁰

Conclusion: ADONAI's sovereignty over people and kingdoms (21:30-31):

To be sure, **the wicked** brazenly defy **ADONAI** and **His wisdom (verse 29)**, but no human power can stand before **the LORD (verses 30-31)**. This proverb is linked by the word **ADONAI**, by the soundplays between **wisdom** and **battle**, and between **plan** (Hebrew: *etsah*) and **victory** (Hebrew: *teshuah*). Together with **the introduction (21:1-2)**, this conclusion acts as two bookends framing **Ha'Shem's** sovereignty over humanity in general (**verses 2** and **30**), and over **kings** and **their armies** in particular (**verses 1** and **31**). Behind the victory of the **righteous/wise** over **the wicked/fools** stands the invincible **God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.**

No human wisdom, understanding, or plan can succeed against ADONAI (21:30 Hebrew). This verse protects against misinterpreting **21:29b** to mean that

a human being, even **the upright**, has the power to live **his** life apart from **the LORD. ADONAI** always has the final word; everything in this **proverb** stops with **the divine Name**. As in **1:7** (see **Ai - The Fear of ADONAI is the Beginning of Wisdom**), this **proverb** seems to be saying essentially the same thing, but from a negative view point. **Wisdom** flows from **ADONAI**; therefore, anything spoken that is contrary to **ADONAI** is not really **wisdom** at all. **The proverb** pair of **verses 30-31** does not negate human **wisdom**, but puts it into perspective. Before **the LORD**, who is infinite in **His** omniscience and omnipotence, human ability fails to even raise its head above the plain of human **folly** (**Proverbs 16:1** and **9, 19:21, 20:24, 24:5-6, 27:1; Deuteronomy 32:30; Job 5:13; Psalm 33:10-11; Isaiah 8:10, 14:27, 24:29, 46:10; Matthew 2:8 and 16, Acts 2:23, 4:27-28; First Corinthians 1:18-25 and 3:19**).⁴³¹

A horse may be prepared for the day of battle, but victory comes from ADONAI (21:31 CJB). In the TaNaKh, as far as **Isra'el** was concerned, there was a difference between going to war, and a holy war. **ADONAI** might allow **Isra'el** to defeat a certain nation, but a holy war was when **ADONAI Himself** would lead **the people into** battle (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Ag - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**). The Ark of the Covenant and the priesthood would lead the way. **Isra'el** was not supposed to actually fight because the battle belonged to **ADONAI**. The conquest of Canaan, notably the complete destruction of **Jericho** (see the commentary on **Joshua Ba - The Destruction of Jericho**) and **Ai** (see **Joshua Bg - The Destruction of Ai**) are examples of holy war. In both of these cases, **ADONAI** had declared those cities to be **cherem**, or devoted to destruction (see the commentary on **Leviticus Ff - Cherem**), and therefore, nothing in them could be touched.

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being such a wonderful **Father** to me. What a comfort to know that **You** are the almighty **King of kings** over the entire universe. No group of **kings/rulers** can ever dethrone **You**. You are so powerful that **You** do not even have to fight - but can defeat an enemy by **the sword of Your mouth (Revelation 19:15-16)**! It brings me such peace to know that someday **You** will set up your eternal **Kingdom. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will never pass away, and His Kingdom is one that will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:14b-c)**. Thank you for being the perfect balance of steadfast love and righteously ruling **Sovereign** of the universe. **Your love, ADONAI, is in the heavens, Your faithfulness up to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God. Your judgments are like the***



Cw - Justice is a Joy to the Righteous 20:29 to 21:31 | 12

great deep (Psalms36:5-6b). In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and the power of **His** resurrection. Amen