



## Reading and Preaching Proverbs, Part 2

by TED MARTENS

The book of Proverbs is filled with truths, principles, promises, or laws that operate in God's world. They are absolutely true, but they do not operate alone.

The many proverbs found in the book of Proverbs are promised principles. The word *promises* speaks to the certainty of the truth. *Principles* speaks to the nature of the truth. Indeed, the proverbs are promises, sure and certain principles that operate in God's world. However, as to their nature, there are laws or spiritual principles that interact with other equally sure and certain principles. Virtually all of the promises or principles throughout the Scriptures do not exist in a vacuum, but exist alongside other promises or principles. Allow me to illustrate this from the natural realm and then from the book of Proverbs.

### In the Natural Realm

The law of gravity is a law, a truth, and a principle of physics. It is part of our thinking anytime we begin climbing or moving upward. We are reminded that what goes up must come down. This is not merely "generally true"; it is a law, a truth, a principle of physics upon which we operate. It is also a law that is relied upon in the most demanding scientific endeavors and stated in the form of an equation [ $F_g = (G \text{ times } (m_1 m_2) \text{ over } (r^2))$ ].

If you have flown in an airplane recently, you may have been reminded of the law of gravity, especially if the airplane experienced turbulence. We well understand that the law of gravity is still operating as we fly. However, an airplane is also being affected by other laws that are operating along with the law of gravity. The laws of aerodynamics are also operating. These allow the plane to take off and cruise in spite of the law of gravity.

How does this airplane ever get off the ground? In and of itself, it weighs thousands of pounds. Add to that the fuel, the luggage, and hundreds of passengers. The gravitational pull on that airplane, or weight, is tremendous. Nevertheless, the pilot has learned to take off, fly, and land airplanes so effectively that airplane flight is one of the safest ways to travel.

Taxiing to the beginning of the runway, the pilot glances at the brightly colored antigravity toggle switch, which will be flipped to the on position shortly. Upon takeoff, the pilot pushes both throttles to full power and increasingly approaches 150–180 mph and then pulls back on the yoke, or "wheel." It is at this point that the pilot flips that antigravity toggle switch, which turns off the gravitation field around the plane. The pilot has learned other flying skills, which likewise increasingly "turn off" the law of gravity, and the airplane lifts into the air.

Of course we know this is not true. The pilot, not misunderstanding the reality of the operation of the law of gravity, knows there is no brightly colored toggle switch that can turn off the law of gravity. However, the pilot has also learned the laws of aerodynamics and how to take advantage of them.

The pilot understands that other laws, principles of physics, truths—"promises"—will also be operating and playing upon the airplane. The laws of motion, lift, drag, and thrust are also playing a role as the pilot lifts that plane off the ground. In fact, how sharply the pilot pulls the plane's nose up into the air will affect whether the law of gravitation will again overrule Bernoulli's Law (i.e., the law of lift).

Laws of aerodynamics operate along with the law of gravity. The pilot must fly the airplane with an understanding of all the laws that are exerting their power on the plane at takeoff and throughout the flight. At times the pilot will even use

some of the other laws—which would seem to impede the plane’s flight—to maneuver, control, or land the plane.

Learning to fly is not learning how to invalidate the law of gravity, but how to use yet other laws, along with gravity, to reach amazing cruising altitudes of 30,000 and 45,000 feet. In fact, working along with the law of gravity, the pilot returns to earth.

It would be misleading and factually erroneous to say that the law of gravity is “generally true” because we can overcome that law’s effects or because the effects of other laws attenuate the effects of gravity during flight. The fact is that many laws—well beyond the law of gravity or even the laws of drag and thrust—are operating as we fly.

Similarly, we would not say that the laws of gravity or acceleration are “generally true” because someone uses a parachute. The typical effects of gravity and acceleration may be lessened by a parachute. Nevertheless the law of gravity and the law of acceleration are fully operating. A parachute is just one way to deal with the laws of gravity and acceleration. (A rocket strapped to one’s back is another way, at least for a while.) A parachute uses the laws of resistance or drag to land safely, while the laws of gravity and acceleration continue to be in full effect.

### In the Book of Proverbs

Likewise, no one principle found in Proverbs is operating in this world in its purest unaffected state; multiple laws operate alongside each other. The book of Proverbs includes principles, or laws, about the wise, rich, poor, transgressor, lazy, diligent, perverse, righteous, naive, proud, humble, young, gray-haired, immoral/prostitute/drunard/glutton (lovers of pleasure), covetous, and jealous, and about liars, talebearers, fools, scoffers, friends, enemies, those at the end, and children. Compute the combinations and permutations of these many options.

### Transgressors, riches, and hard roads

For instance, Proverbs says that the way, or road, of transgressors is hard (Prov. 13:15). Is it hard for every transgressor? Is that a promise, or is it generally true? It is absolutely true! It is just as true as, “Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Gal. 6:7).

Now let’s introduce riches, which is another principle that affects how life operates: There are “the rich” and there are “evildoers.” Put together evildoers with riches, or “transgressors” who have riches available to them, and those two together change the equation, change the outcome. Proverbs states that riches protect the rich (Prov. 10:15; 18:11).

As with the law of acceleration, we have moved from the vacuum of the laboratory to the real world, from the ideal to the real. Since we don’t live in laboratory conditions, rich people are able to throw money at a lot of the consequences that come with being evildoers. The poor who are transgressors, however, will end up on many more “hard roads” and for longer periods of time and with a lot more bumps and bruises than the rich who can buy themselves out of the consequences of their wrongdoing.

Proverbs says that laziness leads to poverty (10:4). However,

those lazy people who have been left an inheritance are lazy rich people, or lazy people who are not in poverty (at least not yet).

### Overarching Biblical principles

Now add other overarching Biblical principles/laws that God has built into this world and that affect outcomes. The Bible states that “to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). People bear different levels of responsibility. Add that law into their lives, and the outcome changes again.

Another overarching principle is called grace. God’s grace to the saint, and even to the sinner, is also operating at all times. There is also “common grace” by which God allows the sun and rain to fall on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). Add in the effects of grace, and the outcome changes again. Some do not fall so hard and fast because of God’s gracious parachutes of life.

Another law is the law of “heritage” by which the Lord is kind to some because of the devotion and godliness of their fathers. For example, many of the kings of Israel were spared the full effects of their ungodliness because of their “father” King David.

Further is the law of “now” and “at the end.” This law requires that we don’t draw any conclusions too quickly about what we see or think we see, for there is an end to what people do in life. Some of God’s promises extend decades, lifetimes, and even centuries.

Instead of consigning promises/principles/Biblical proverbs to the category of being “generally true,” why not recognize that they are laws and principles that are sure and certain (i.e., promises). Yet these laws or principles do not operate independent of other laws and principles. They all intersect and operate in God’s complex world just as equally certain and sure.

### The Real Problem

In spite of those who would like to explain away the sure and certain promised principles found in Proverbs, the fact is that this world, and all that is in it, is God’s world. I want to affirm that this world, though more complex than any one principle, operates by divine design and order through natural and spiritual principles and laws. Those laws and principles are a mere reflection of God, and one day they will be fully reflected in His Kingdom.

The problem is not with the laws that operate in God’s world, but with us, who were born with a desire to be lawless and to live by our own laws. We want to believe that our laws work, but in fact they do not. The problem is with us, who may operate by some of the promises and truths but ignore, misunderstand, misapply, or dismiss other laws that are also operating.

For these reasons we must read and preach every proverb in the Book as one of God’s sure and certain promises. **B**

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