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Refreshing Water

Skillful Living

Proverbs 21

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I want you to think about the environments that you are in, like on a weekly basis. So home, work, neighborhood, school, the dorm—whatever environment makes sense to you. Here's the question: Would the people in those environments say your presence is more like refreshing water that brings life to their souls, or more like a scorching wind that drains the life out of them? Well that's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 21. We're working our way through the book of Proverbs, taking a chapter at a time, kind of cherry picking different proverbs within a chapter and trying to continue on this theme of the idea that all of us ultimately create the culture that we have to live in. It's not unusual for people to be disappointed or dissatisfied with the environment or the culture in which they live, but oftentimes we fail to realize our contribution to the breakdown of that culture and what makes it so dissatisfying. Proverbs talk a lot about that. So chapter 21, verse 1:

> **The king's heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the Lord;**
> **He turns it wherever He wishes.** (*NASB, Proverbs 21:1)

So there's some that think that verse one is referring to the idea that God uses kings, both good and evil, to ultimately accomplish His purpose because He is sovereign. While there are passages that certainly teach that and that is certainly true, I don't think that is what verse one is referring to. I think it's referring to the king that genuinely wants to be a good king, because the metaphor, the imagery, is the idea of this *refreshing water* that God *channels* to where that water is needed.

So again, a king in the ancient world was pretty much a law unto himself. He had the potential to make life absolutely miserable for people or he had the potential to make life wonderful for people, depending on the heart of the king. When you see the word **heart**, we tend to think in English of emotion, but biblically, heart is more comprehensive; it's more holistic. It's mind, emotion, will—the fullness of the person. So the idea is this metaphor of a king, who is surrendered to God, so that God can channel this water to where it is needed in order to bring refreshment.

In the ancient world, water was life. We were just back in Israel a little more than a week ago, and even today in modern-day Israel and Jordan, there are places where water is life or death. It's a serious issue; it's hard for us to appreciate that here. Even when we go through periods of severe drought, you go to the kitchen, you get a glass of water, and we don't have that same sense of this is, "Do-or-die," this is "Live or not live." But in the ancient world that was very much the case, and so what you see is a lot of manmade ways to capture water and then redirect water. The Hebrew here is not referring to a lake; it's not referring to a river or a creek or a spring. It's referring to this idea of collecting and channeling the water where it is needed. We saw lots of examples of ways that was done through channels and tunnels, ways to get the water where it's needed.

So the idea of verse one is that this king genuinely wants to bring flourishing to the people. In order for that to happen, this refreshing water, which is the metaphor, needs to get where it is most needed. For that to happen, he has to be surrendered to God and God then channels that water in order to bring refreshment in the kingdom.

I'm just going to guess that there are none of us in the room this morning who are actually kings, but we're still people of influence. Every environment that you are a part of, you either add life or you drain the life; you are either like refreshing water or you're more like a harsh wind that just dries up what little bit of life is left in people's lives. So the idea is as leaders, as influencers, as business owners—whatever fits you—think of it in terms of: for me to actually be a person that brings life into these environments, I have to be broken and humble and surrendered to God, because I don't always know what is needed. So then He steers and channels that water appropriately. That's verse one. The problem is in verse 2a:

Every man's way is right in his own eyes,

This is the problem. We all tend to think, "I'm right...I'm politically right...I'm socially right... I'm right!" So now think about this for a moment. What then is the implication? If I'm always right, then in my mind, you're always wrong! Now how does that create an environment for flourishing? Basically if my mindset is, "This environment is bad...it's disappointing...it's dissatisfying...it's not what I wish it would be, but I'm right," then the mindset is that if the rest of you yahoos would get it together, things would be better. And so the idea of verse two is:

Every man's way is right in his own eyes,
But the LORD weighs the hearts.

God ultimately knows. So here's something to think about. It's just possible, I'm not always right. I know that's a shocker! I may not be politically right...I may not be socially right...I just may not be right on some things. And so the whole idea is to accomplish verse one, I do need to be broken and humble and surrendered—and understand I may not always see things clearly. I may not always have a right view of things. I may not always quite understand what's going on. There may be more than what I understand. Therefore, I have to be surrendered to God, who channels that water to the place where it's needed, or I'm not going to be the kind of king that I really want to be before God.

The fact is: all of us have a story. We have a story...we have hurts...we have backgrounds...we have insecurities, and that affects everything that we do and say and think. And the reality is that creates a lens through which I view life—and oftentimes it skews things. So I have to be humble enough to realize I maybe am not always right. I maybe do not always see this correctly, and so I must be open to whatever it is that God wants for me in order to really bring refreshing water and flourishing to these different environments where I find myself. It's a very bad frame of mind to think, "I'm right; the rest are wrong." You're never going to get to flourishing if you can't somehow get away from that.

So what does God want? Verse 3:

To do righteousness and justice
Is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice.

The idea of **more than sacrifice** is that God doesn't want us to go through a bunch of religious rituals. That doesn't impress Him. That's not what He's asking of us. He doesn't want us to just put on our Jesus face, show up at church, check a box, and then the rest of the week suck the life out of the people around us! That doesn't impress Him; that's not what He wants.

You remember Saul had this problem. Saul disobeyed; Samuel confronts him; Saul says, *"Hey, it's no big deal; I'll just offer a little sacrifice."* And that's when Samuel utters those famous words. *"Saul! To obey is better than sacrifice*!" So what God wants from us is the right heart. He wants **righteousness** and **justice**. Now we've talked a lot about these two Hebrew words over our study of the book of Proverbs. They are two of the most important terms in Proverbs. **Righteousness** is the Hebrew word *tzadek*. It's referring to the person who desires to see flourishing in the community. It's much more about *us* than it is about *me*. It's much more about how can we flourish together than me and my agenda. When Proverbs talks about the wicked, it's not talking about people that go out and kill people; it's not talking about people that go out and rob banks. It's talking about people that are selfish and self-centered, people that will disadvantage others to advantage themselves. The *Tzadek* is so committed to the group flourishing that he or she will actually disadvantage himself in order to advantage the larger community.

So just think of it like this: Whether you're talking about home or work or neighborhood—whatever the environment—and you take ten people that are selfish and self-centered, there is virtually no possibility for flourishing. None! Everybody loses! But if you take ten people that have the heart of the *Tzadek*, everyone flourishes. What does God want? He wants righteousness!

Now we live in a culture where by and large people are selfish; they are independent. They are self-centered and will typically disadvantage others to advantage themselves. It's the law of the jungle; it's the survival of the fittest. It's just who we are as a culture right now. So while everybody would say we want flourishing, we're dissatisfied with the culture as it is, we're never going to get there unless something significant changes deep within our hearts.

The second term is **justice**, in Hebrew *mishpat*, a critical term. In the ancient world justice was almost unheard of. By and large the rich, the powerful ran the show. The judicial system was very corrupt; commerce was very corrupt. If you were average and certainly if you were poor, you stood no chance for justice. So you see it all over in the Scriptures—talking about the need for justice, the need for people to be treated right and fair and for people to be safe and respected. The idea of *mishpat* carries the idea that regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of whether you're rich or poor, male or female, none of that matters. *Mishpat* justice is the idea that there is an environment that is safe, an environment that is just and right, and people have a sense that if I do the right thing, I will be appropriately rewarded. This is a system that is fair. That's the idea there.

You know, as a culture, we say that we are interested in justice. People talk about injustices...on and on we go. But the reality is we are unable to get there. Something is in the way. Something prevents that. What is necessary for that to happen is a culture of the righteous and the just. Stop and think about the environments into which you have influence. One of the things that I'm weary of is: I'm just weary of all the labels. I'm weary of all the political correctness. I'm weary of all the things in our past as a nation that we have done that were wrong. There's no question there's been stuff in our history that's been bad. There's stuff currently today that's bad. We live in a culture where there isn't a lot of justice. I'm not talking about the legal system. Any time you have humans involved in anything, there will be flaws. But worldwide, I would say the system of justice we have in America is still the best in the world. I'm not talking about that. I'm just talking about everyday stuff—the way people are treated in neighborhoods...at school...at work. The way people are treated in families—just the everyday stuff of life.

It seems like we're just unable to get past all the conflict. We are in a culture full of political correctness. We're in a culture where everyone seems offended by everything. Why is that? Well, it's because we're selfish; we're self-absorbed. Everything's about *me* and I'm offended by

everything. I'm tired of all the labels of "Black this," and "Black that," and "White Privilege this," and all of those terms. Don't misunderstand me—I'm not saying that there are not problems. Of course there are problems! I am saying those terms are inflammatory. They don't solve problems; they don't quiet people down; they don't cause people to treat one another with more respect. They just keep the conflict going. So I'd like to suggest a different way.

What if, in all those environments where we are involved, where we have influence, we just viewed people as people made in the image of God? And because they are made in the image of God, they have great value. It doesn't matter if you're Black or White or Middle Eastern. It doesn't matter if you're male or female. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor. It doesn't matter in this environment if you're Muslim, Christian, or Hindu. It doesn't matter if you're gay or straight. These are people made in the image of God, and they have great value.

So we stop and think about: what would it mean in this environment to create an environment where it's safe, where it's fair, where it's just, where people would have a sense that this is a place where there is justice and people are treated rightly, and it's a place where people can flourish together? That has much more potential of creating these pockets of flourishing instead of just keeping the whole thing stirred up all the time.

So, what does God want? Well He wants righteousness, and He wants justice. Oftentimes in the Scriptures, when we're talking about these cultural things, often the writers of Scripture reduce it down to a micro-environment in order to help us make sense of it. And more times than not, the micro-environment is the home, the family. So you kind of get a sense of this is how these principles look at home, and then start to make sense of what it would look like at work or school, or in the dorm or the neighborhood, or whatever. With that in mind, we go to verse 9:

> **It is better to live in a corner of a roof**
> **Than in a house shared with a contentious woman.**

Ohhh boy…*(laughter)* Now some of you are thinking, *"You know, Bryan, if you're going to cherry pick Proverbs, why in your right mind would you cherry pick that one?"* It's a really good question! But I think I have a really good answer...because it matters to God! There's a reason why God just said what He said. As a matter of fact, it comes up quite a bit in Proverbs. I'll give you an example, just a few samplings. Move ahead to verse 19:

> **It is better to live in a desert land**
> **Than with a contentious and vexing woman.**

Go back to chapter nineteen, verse 13:

> **A foolish son is destruction to his father,**
> **And the contentions of a wife are a constant dripping. (**Some translations say ...are a dripping faucet.)

One more: Chapter 27, verse 15:

> **A constant dripping on a day of steady rain**
> **And a contentious woman are alike.**

Now that's just a sampling. This comes up a lot in Proverbs, so apparently God thinks there's a problem that needs to be discussed. A couple of things related to background: In the ancient world, women were devalued; women were mistreated; women basically stayed at home while their husbands went out and about and socialized and moved about. Their lives were hard, often very boring and routine. The people in the ancient world didn't really live in their houses like we do. They basically slept in their houses. That's still true in lots of places in the world. And so houses are really, really small; all they are meant for is sleeping, and they usually involved extended family, so lots of people in a very small space. With a woman who is angry and bitter and dissatisfied with life, it becomes a very unpleasant place. Now the point of the proverb is not men should go up on the roof. The point of the proverb is we all ultimately live in the environment we create, and a contentious, angry, bitter woman makes life miserable for everyone at home. That's the idea of the proverb.

Now here are a couple things to think about. Before ladies start thinking, "This is so unfair that you're picking on us," first of all there are far more proverbs that specifically address men and men's problems than women in the Proverbs. It's also true that we're all the way up to chapter 21, and I have dealt with a long list of man issues and this is the first time I've selected a proverb that deals specifically with women. So don't do the, "I'm a victim; it's a so unfair," thing!

When we dealt with the verses that specifically deal with man stuff, I did not pull any punches and I am not going to tiptoe around this one, just because it is a bit delicate. Some of you ladies right now—you are having a physical reaction to this. You are getting hot! You can feel it in your neck, in your face; you're getting hot. You are about to get contentious with me to argue you're not contentious! *(laughter)* There are other ladies all over this auditorium who have no emotional reaction to that verse. They are like, "That would be terrible! That's why I don't do it." But some of you are reacting. You're getting pretty hot, and all I'm asking is, "Why is that? What's going on that that would set you off like that?"

I had an elder in my previous church that used to say, "When you throw a stone into a pack of coyotes, the one you hit is the one that yelps...*(laughter)* There you go! Again, the point of the proverb is not men should go live on the roof. The point of the proverb is that this is a really miserable way to live—and it must be a problem because it comes up often in Proverbs.

Just to be completely honest with you, sometimes I hear the way wives talk to their husbands, and it just makes me sad. They make fun of him; they put him down. They criticize him; they emasculate him. They are always picking at him, always reminding him of all the ways he disappoints her. Sometimes when I hear wives talk to their husband, it sounds like they are talking to a child. Some of you are thinking, "Well that's because he acts like a child!" To which I would say, "Really...Really? Is that really what it is...what's going on there?"

Some of you wives complain because your husbands are never home. When he is home, what does he get? If when he comes home he's picked at, he's criticized, he's emasculated, he's put down, why would he want to be there? Sometimes wives complain because their husbands won't help with the kids, but if you get into the story a little bit farther, you find out he doesn't help with the kids because she won't let him. She's the she-bear, and nobody is touching the cubs and he is pushed to the sideline—even from having influence with his own children. And then she wonders why is he disconnected? Why isn't he involved? Why won't he help?

I'm convinced that every man has within him what I refer to as a hero complex. I think it's a part of the way God has made a man. It's the knight-in-shining-armor thing. For me personally, I don't

need a lot of people fussing over me...I really don't. I also can endure a lot of criticism. Fine! But if it starts to feel like Patti no longer sees me as her knight-in-shining-armor, something within me starts to die. It strikes at the heart of who I am as a man. Ladies, I have to tell you something. When you do that to us, we will fight back...we will fight back! How do we fight back? We go up on the roof...metaphorically speaking. We disconnect. We become passive. We roll over. We pour ourselves into our work; we hang out with our buddies. Sadly, sometimes men turn to pornography or to another relationship. When you emasculate us, some way we will fight back, and, again, the point of the proverb is: you end up living in the culture you create, and it becomes miserable!

Now please understand. This proverb specifically is talking about women...wives. But I also understand it's entirely possible that the man is contentious; the man is angry; the man is controlling; the man is blowing up the environment. Of course it's entirely possible. I meet with loving, caring, godly wives who are doing everything they can to make their marriage work, but unfortunately they are married to a man who is selfish; he's self-centered; he's narcissistic; he's foolish, and he simply won't allow the marriage to flourish. So I'm not saying it's always the wife's problem. I'm not saying that at all. I don't think that. But I am saying that we were told in verse two that part of the problem is we always think we're right. Therefore, by implication, who is wrong? So if the environment at home is unpleasant, it's unfulfilling, then before you just dismiss that, before you get stuck in your head, "Well, it's not my fault! He's this and this, and this, and this…" maybe just stop and at least consider the possibility that maybe you're not right about all of that, and maybe you are part of the problem. And maybe if you would look in the mirror and address some of that, something at home could possibly change for the better. Whether the problem is the husband or the wife or both, who wants to live that way? And at some point, people have to stop and say, "This is terrible...and what can we begin to do to bring about necessary changes?"

From there the proverb goes on, and so you think about if this is the problem at home, then it just bleeds out into every other environment. As the family goes, so goes the community. So in verse ten it bleeds out to how we treat our neighbors. It affects how we go into the marketplace, into school and relationships. So basically again, as the family goes, so goes the community. So as a culture, our culture is unraveling because our families are unraveling. And the way back is not more laws. The way back is to regain the values that put our families back together. That's kind of a core biblical value. Verse 11a:

When the scoffer is punished...

The **scoffer** is the fool that doesn't want to hear, doesn't want to listen, doesn't want to be taught, doesn't want to change. And this fool, the scoffer, shows up again and again in the book of Proverbs, and basically would make fun of everything that I've just said. That scoffer is determined to go down the wrong path and will suffer the consequence of that. You see it again in verse 16:

A man who wanders from the way of understanding
Will rest in the assembly of the dead (the shadows of the dead)**.**

Basically you travel the path and you're just going to make a miserable mess of your life. You will be called things in verse 24. You are:

"Proud," "Haughty," "Scoffer," ...describes one who acts with insolent pride.

You have it again in verse 29a:

A wicked man displays a bold face,

We'd probably say *bows the neck.* So the scoffer, the fool, determines, "Nobody's going to tell me what to do. Nobody's going to blame me. Nobody's going to point the finger at me." And they're just determined to travel the path of destruction. But the wise begins to rethink this. In more of verse 11 it says,

When the scoffer is punished, the naïve becomes wise;

The **naïve** in Proverbs isn't someone who lacks intelligence; they are just unlearned. They are just kind of young and trying to figure it out. So it carries this idea that I am looking at the scoffer, and the scoffer is ruining his life. Therefore, I think to myself: Wait a minute; I don't want that. I don't want an environment like that at home. I don't want a marriage like that. I don't want a relationship like that with my kids. I don't want an environment like that at work. The **naïve** is learning and figuring out, "I don't want that. That's no way to live. I want something different."

So what the proverb is saying is they are becoming wise; they are becoming skillful. I'm absolutely convinced you can learn as much from a bad example as you can from a good example. But when you see how people are destroying their lives, you have to stop and think about: What's happening here and why is that happening? "I don't want that; I don't want to live that way. I don't want to live in an environment like that," which implies it's necessary to begin thinking about different choices...a different path...a different way of living. Verse 21a:

He who pursues righteousness and loyalty... (Loyalty is the Hebrew *hesed,* which is covenant loyalty. So loyalty to the path of God. What do you find?)
He finds life, righteousness, and honor.

The reoccurring message of Proverbs is there are two paths, and you have to decide which path you're going to travel...which gets us now back to verses one, two and three. What does God want? He doesn't want a bunch of empty, religious activity. You know what He wants? He wants righteousness and justice. He wants people that have the heart of Jesus, people that want to see people flourishing, people that are even willing to disadvantage themselves in order to advantage the group. "Let's do this together and see if we can create an environment where everybody flourishes," an environment of justice. What would it mean to view people as people made in the image of God? "Let's create an environment where we all feel safe and can come together and live in a way that's very different from the way life is lived in the culture."

What's the problem with that? Verse two. We have a tendency to think we're always right, which by implication, then everyone else is wrong. So if the methodology is I have to change everyone else because I'm right and they're messed up, we're never going to get there. There has to be a heart that is broken, in humility before God, where our desire is to create these environments of flourishing and God's going to have to steer my heart. God's going to have to redirect the water to the places of need in order to create an environment where people can flourish.

Of course any time that the Bible talks about the king, there is always this reminder of the ultimate King—the ultimate King who is always right, always just, always good, which of course is looking for the coming of The King who would come about a thousand years later—God in the flesh, Jesus

Christ! It was Jesus who stood before the people and identified Himself as the *living water*. He stood with the woman at the well in Samaria and identified that what she was actually looking for is refreshing water that will satisfy for the rest of her life. He identified Himself as that *living water*. Basically what Jesus said is, "I'm what you've been looking for your whole life."

But here's the problem. Many of the people that we are with on a weekly basis have no interest in Jesus or His water. For whatever reason, whatever their story...just not interested. So how do we change that? We change that by creating pockets where people begin to experience something different...different from the rest of the culture...different from all the chaos and all the hatred and all the conflict and all the stuff that's going on in the culture. This is a pocket where it's different and this is a taste of a different kind of water that actually refreshes your soul. Through that it begins to create a taste for something different...something more. "Maybe that really is possible," which then begins to create a platform from which we can present meaningful discussions about the One who is ultimately the living water that every soul longs for. God has called each of us in whatever environment we're in, not to be a scorching wind that drains the life out of people's souls, but to be a refreshing water that gives people just a taste of the world as God intended it to be, and just a taste of what is available to them if they would open themselves up to a relationship with the One who is the eternal, living water of God.

Just imagine if every one of us, in all of the environments where we find ourselves, took this seriously and created such pockets of flourishing around our community. There is no question it would bring about significant change for good! May that be so!

Our Father, we are reminded of the importance of our call to rightly represent the message of the gospel in a dry and thirsty world. God, every single one of us finds ourselves in environments every week, where we can either give life or drain life. We can either keep the conflict going or begin to work toward something different. Lord, may we faithfully represent the message of the gospel in every corner of this community, that others might come to know the Jesus who has saved our souls. For this we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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