



“My Favorite Things”

An essay by Rev. Dr. Jack R. Miller

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During the first week of the 2007 Summer Programme in Theology, held at Oxford University, I had the opportunity to attend a seminar entitled “Theological Reflections on Biblical Wisdom and Psalms.” The course was tutored by The Reverend Canon Professor John Sawyer, the Head of Religious Studies at Newcastle University, and joint editor of the Blackwell Bible Commentary Series. Because I have a passion for the study of scripture, my initial expectation of the class was to deepen my understanding of “Wisdom Literature,” and to augment my previous studies of the Old Testament. What I did not expect was the deep reflection the class brought to me personally with respect to the Book of Proverbs and Psalms.

Everyone attending the class had their favorite Proverb or Psalm. Throughout the week, these were shared in class and during the breaks. It was more than just a recital of memorized verse. Each best-loved Proverb or Psalm had a personal story at the root of its selection. In each case, there was some event or experience in each person’s life that inspired the Proverb or Psalm to become a cherished verse. I found myself in a quandary. Although there are many verses in both books I have enjoyed reading over the years, what verse or verses would I consider as my favorite Proverb or Psalm; and more importantly, why? What event or experience in my own life would elevate these specific verses to the position of “favorite?”

In seeking to find my favorite Proverb and the story behind its selection, I discovered it was not one verse, but a group of Proverbs that stood out.

There is an old Bible on my bookshelf. It is well worn and held together with electrical tape. It was my father’s Bible, passed on to me years before he made his final journey. It was the kind of Bible that fell open easily in your hand, perfect for preaching and teaching Sunday school.

When I opened it to the Book of Proverbs I found a cluster of verses with numerous side notes, underlining, and yellow highlights. These were notations made while I was working with the young adult youth group at our church. One summer we undertook a Bible study on the Book of Proverbs.

I had worked with these kids since their preteen years, and now they were young adults; some in college, others were starting a career, and a few were newly married. With this group of twenty- to twenty-three-year-olds, a study of Proverbs was just what they needed. Sunday school was behind them now, but they were not ready for that big step into the world of serious adult Bible study. Proverbs became the bridge they needed. It offered insight into life, love, marriage, and advice that was, and remains, almost timeless. We spent a lot of time laughing at what I called “the wife Proverbs.” A series of verses centered on wives, husbands, and marriage. Often, they read more like comedian Henny Youngman’s famous one-liners (“take my wife – please”) than scripture. As an icebreaker, I began each session with a quote about marriage from famous people of the times. And yet, through the laughter and good-natured banter, the life lessons prevailed. Deep and meaningful discussions followed.

We met at a reunion years later. Now in their forties, the group still remembered the Bible study we shared so many years before. Some could even recite a few of the funnier Proverbs as we laughed and reminisced around the picnic table. To this group of adults, now with families of their own, that one summer spent with the Book of Proverbs remained the single most meaningful Bible study they could remember. That is why these twelve Proverbs are my favorites. Through them I remember a group of young adults, and the summer we spent together. Laughing often, while they learned about love, marriage, and life from the Book of Proverbs.

“I was married by a Judge; I should have asked for a jury.”

(George Burns)ⁱ

- Proverbs 19:13 “...a wife’s nagging is an endless dripping.”ⁱⁱ
- Proverbs 21:9 “*Better to live on the corner of a roof than to share a house with a nagging wife.*”
- Proverbs 21:19 “*Better to live in a wilderness than with a nagging and hot-tempered wife.*”
- Proverbs 27:15-16 “*An endless dripping on a rainy day and a nagging wife are alike. The one who controls her controls the wind and grasps oil with his right hand.*”

I remember that after the jokes, laughter, and finger pointing subsided, asking the group a question: Why, do you suppose, a wife becomes a nag? Certainly, she wasn’t always a nag. If she had been one when they were dating or engaged, why would he have married her? What happened?

We turned to Colossians 3: 18-21, and 1 Peter 3: 1-7, and began to discuss the mutual responsibility husbands and wives share for the happiness of each other, their spiritual well-being, and the success of their marriage. Since, as scripture put it, “*we are joint heirs of the gift of life*” (1 Peter 3:7). It is a lesson in constant and unceasing care and respect for one another. I have been married and divorced three times and have learned many things from these experiences. All three failed in part, because one or both partners stopped caring for the other. One or both failed to see the changes in the other or didn’t care enough to

ⁱ All quotes were taken from “The Waterfront Wedding Chapel,” publication of “Quotes on Marriage.”

ⁱⁱ Proverbs listed are from the “Holman Christian Standard Bible,” Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2001

notice. People can grow apart when they let go; when they stop caring enough to hold on. An unknown author wrote the words, *“Love is a human condition that exists when the satisfaction or security of another person becomes as significant to one as one’s own satisfaction or security.”* When significance shifts, love is diverted away from the other. If it continues, the love and the marriage, like neglected flowers, will wither and eventually die.

- Proverbs 18:22 *“He that hath found a good wife, hath found a good thing, and shall receive a pleasure from the Lord. He that driveth away a good wife driveth away a good thing.”*

“By all means, marry; if you get a good wife, you’ll be happy. If you get a bad one, you’ll become a philosopher.” (Socrates)

- Proverbs 9:13 *“A foolish woman and clamorous, and full of allurements, and knowing nothing at all...”*
- Proverbs 11:16 *“A gracious woman shall find glory: and the strong shall have riches.”*
- Proverbs 12:4 *“A capable wife is her husband’s crown, but a wife who causes shame is like rottenness in his bones.”*
- Proverbs 19:14 *“A house and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a sensible wife is from the Lord.”*
- Proverbs 31:10 *“Who can find a virtuous and capable wife? She is worth more than precious rubies.”*
- Proverbs 31:30 *“Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord will be praised.”*

Our pastor told a story one morning that goes well with these verses.ⁱⁱⁱ A king had four wives, which was the custom in his country. He loved the fourth wife the most and lavished her with everything her heart desired. He also loved the third wife and was generous to her too. He loved to show her off to visiting kings and royalty, but secretly worried that he would lose her to another. He also loved the second wife. She was his confidant, someone he could go to in times of trouble, and she would always be there to give him good advice. The first wife loved the king dearly, and efficiently took care of the affairs of his kingdom. Although her efforts brought the king continued riches, he hardly paid attention to her.

The king grew ill and was told by his physician he did not have long to live. His worst fear was not of dying, but of making the journey alone. He summoned his fourth wife, explained his condition, and asked if she would go with him, so he would not be alone. “No Way,” she said, and left him immediately without another word. He called for his third wife, explained that he was dying, and wanted her to come with him so he wouldn’t be alone. “Absolutely not,” she exclaimed, “life is too good, and when you are gone, I will marry another.” The king was heartbroken. He summoned his second wife and was met with more disappointment. “I have always been there with good advice my king, but I will not come with you,” she explained, “but I will walk with you to the gravesite. It is the best that I can do.” The king lay in bed beside himself with fear and grief. Then he heard a familiar voice from the doorway. It was his first wife. She was thin and pale from years of the king’s neglect. “I’ll go with you,” she said, “you won’t be alone. I have been here all these years, and I won’t leave your side. In life or death, I will follow you no matter where you go.” The king began to die, and

ⁱⁱⁱ Story is from Karma (The Four Wives), one of the Agama Sutras, and the early sermons of Buddha.

with his last thoughts wished in his heart he had paid more attention to his devoted first wife.

The moral to the story is this that all of us have four wives, or partners in life. The fourth wife is our body, and no matter how much time and money we spend to keep it fit, and well dressed, it will leave us when we die. The third wife is our property, possessions, and status. When we die it will end up going to someone else. The second wife is our family and friends. It does not matter how much they love us, and enjoy our company, when the time comes, they can only walk with us as far as the gravesite. The first wife is our spirit, or soul. We often neglect and ignore it, but our soul is with us always, following wherever we go, in this life and beyond.

This story speaks, as the Proverbs before it did, of the wonder and fulfillment in finding the right partner in life. All too often, the superficial things that are pleasant to the eye and soothing to the heart blind us. The story provides a definition of an enduring term associated with two people who have found a special bond. This state is available to all but attained by few. It is when a couple becomes soul mates.

“A man in love is incomplete until he is married. Then he is finished.”

(Zsa Zsa Gabor)

- Proverbs 5:18-19 *“Let thy vein be blessed and rejoice with the wife of thy youth: Let her be thy dearest hind, and most agreeable fawn: let her breasts inebriate thee at all times be thou delighted continually with her love.”*

Silvano Licciani was 85 years old when he passed away. While I was growing up, he was affectionately known as Uncle Sil. He and his wife Bina had been married for over sixty years. She passed away a few months after Uncle Sil. Their only son Douglas and I grew up together

on the family farm. Uncle Sil spent his whole working life in the food service industry, first as the owner/proprietor of a grocery store, and then as the proud owner of “Sil’s,” a family restaurant. It was a Saturday ritual at our house to have breakfast there. Uncle Sil ran this successful business for over thirty-five years from the same location. He and Aunt Bina lived in the same house they purchased shortly after they were married, until they both passed away. This type of stability in life, work, and marriage is rare. I asked him once how their marriage had lasted so long. Uncle Sil responded, “It’s simple, when we took our vows all those years ago, we promised to love, honor, and cherish each other, in good times and bad, until death parts us. When you make a vow before God to stay together for life, you learn how to work things out along the way.”

“Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads, which sew people together through the years.”

(Simone Signoret)

The selection of my favorite Psalm was not a difficult one. Psalm 139 is unquestionably my favorite. I was introduced to this Psalm many years ago on a weekend assignment in Marysville, California. I was part of a team of twenty, sent from all over Northern California to lead a renewal weekend at a quaint little church near the downtown area.

At our first team meeting, she was there. It happened too long ago to try and remember names, but she was thin, had blonde hair, and spoke with a soft accent. That much I remember. We were both there to work with the music program, testify about our spiritual lives, and sing special music. I arrived with sound equipment and background tapes. She brought only a guitar and a sweet, almost haunting voice. If I concentrate hard enough, I can still hear it in my mind.

As the weekend activities progressed, the Spirit moved through the little community of believers. I was scheduled to sing on Sunday morning. On Saturday, she was prepared to give her testimony, and sing during the evening service. While some of the details of her story have faded with time, I remember she spoke softly about a life away from God, which finally led to thoughts of taking her own life. In her rage one night she threw her Bible against the wall. It fell to the floor and opened to Psalm 139. She began to read, but was overcome with emotion, and could not finish. What she read calmed her. She fell asleep clutching the scripture to her chest. The next morning was Sunday. She found herself sitting in her old church, although she was not sure how she got there. The message that day was on Psalm 139. She finally read the Psalm in its entirety, and realized God was speaking to her through the verses, as he was the night before when she was about to take her own life. The altar call was extended as music from the hymn “Oh God, You Search Me,” written by Bernadette Farrell filled the building. She fell to her knees before the altar and opened her heart to Jesus. She left the church that day to begin a new life of joy and hope, with the words of Psalm 139 filling her mind and spirit.

A hushed stillness filled the little church in Marysville after she shared her story, and everyone sat in silence as she began to play and sing. “*Oh Lord, you know me,*” the soft voice began; she had put the Psalm of her salvation and her story to music. Tears welled in everyone’s eyes. Even this old hardened former Marine could not hold back the tears.

I never saw her again, but the memory of that weekend in Marysville remains. Somewhere over the years, I have lost the gift she gave me, a green bookmark with Psalm 139 on it. But my love for those words will never be lost. It will always be my favorite Psalm.

“You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. it.”^{iv}

(Psalm 139 vs. 1-6)

The young girl’s song and the Psalm speak of God’s omnipresence and omniscience; God is everywhere and knows all things. The Psalmist knew, as the girl in Marysville learned, that God knows us completely. In verse five are the words, *“You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.”* The third verse of “Servant Song,” written by Donna Marie McGargill, speaks to the same theme: *“Above, below, and around me, before, behind, and all through me, your Spirit burns deep within me. Fire my life with your love.”*

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

(Psalm 139 vs. 7-12)

^{iv} Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.](#)® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

In these verses we become aware there is nowhere we can hide from the presence of God. Not in the highest places (heavens), or in lowest recesses of the earth (*Sheol*^v), neither in darkness, or light, nor in a bedroom as we contemplate suicide. Even if we board a jet and fly to the furthestmost place on earth, God is there. Jerome^{vi} calls these verses “some of the most exquisite poetry in the Psalter, perhaps unsurpassed as a description of the inescapability of God’s presence.”

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand - when I awake, I am still with you.”

(Psalm 139 vs. 13-18)

As we read these verses, we begin to understand how well God knows us. The imagery in verse thirteen of using the words “*created*” and “*knit*” creates a vision of the potter and the weaver. As if the “womb is penetrated by the creative gaze of God, who participates in the making of this wonder that the human creature is.^{vii}” In verse 16 we see a God who knew us before a day of life was lived, and used a Bible thrown, and pages opened, to calm a troubled soul. In verses 17-18, the wonder of the Psalmist is shown. It is the very same wonder the girl in Marysville must have felt, knowing that God knew and loved her

^v The world of departed souls – Easton’s Bible Dictionary

^{vi} The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 34:156, page 550

^{vii} The International Bible Commentary, page 856

enough, to let her go to the brink of disaster, and then show her the pathway of reconciliation, new life, and purpose.

“If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.”

(Psalm 139 vs. 19-24)

The Oxford Bible Commentary, page 402 raises the question that verses 19-24 may be part of a separate Psalm. Reasoning is presented that would support either argument. “Many readers wish that verses 19-22 were not there, and it is important to remember that for the Psalmist the wicked were God’s enemies and that for him, God’s honor was at stake.” As for me, I see a writer who becomes aware of the conflict between the wickedness of some, in contrast to the greatness, and wonder of God. It is good versus evil, and he takes a stand for good. Perceiving the hatred of God toward wickedness, the writer feels compelled to adopt the same feelings toward the enemies of God. The only visible flaw I can see is that man cannot measure what God feels using human emotions as a yardstick. In the closing verses (23-24), the Psalmist is imploring God to make one more heart check. In view of these wicked and bloodthirsty enemies of yours (19-22), he is saying, please search me once more, and probe my heart and my thoughts. If you find anything there that offends you, show me the way that I may be faithful to your will. A petition each of us lifts in prayer each time we recite the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those

who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

It is realizing that God knows us more deeply than we know ourselves. God is not hampered by the limitations of the human mind. He clearly sees the intent, and truth within our heart and thoughts. The Psalmist knew this, the girl from Marysville learned this, and we should come to know this, each time we read Psalm 139. Therefore, it is and will always be my favorite.

“Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens. Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens. Brown paper packages tied up with strings. These are a few of my favorite things.”^{viii}

In the 1965 Oscar winning motion picture “The Sound of Music,” there is a song that salutes the image of favorite things. Its lyrics not only express the wonder of favorite things, but also shows us how remembering them in times of sadness and despair can help to bring comfort and renewed focus. The words of the chorus sing out: *“When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I’m feeling sad, I simply remember my favorite things, and then I don’t feel so bad.”*

The intent in authoring this essay is similar in nature. My purpose was two-fold: to identify my favorite Proverbs and Psalm and to illustrate why each was revered. It was essential to discover the reasons, events, or life experiences, which contributed to understanding the relevance of these specific Proverbs and Psalms in my life. Why, as the song would put it, would they be “among my favorite things?”

Through personal reflection of a past summer Bible study, and remembering a chance weekend encounter, I was able to find the

^{viii} Lyrics by Rodgers & Hammerstein, music by Richard Rodgers.

answers I was seeking. The Oxford seminar not only met my original expectations of obtaining a better understanding of the “Wisdom Literature,” it opened my eyes to a deeper appreciation of those special scripture passages, impressed upon my very soul through the many life lessons I have experienced.

In ministering to someone in need of comfort, those passages and related life stories could now provide hope in a time of tribulation, guidance in time of anguish, and reassurance in times of disheartenment. When someone is filled with sadness, I can remember those favorite verses; those “favorite things,” and the related stories behind them. This will allow me to minister to those confronting unhappiness or discomfort in a more profound and personal way.

What is your favorite Proverb or Psalm? Why are they your favorite? What events or life experience is behind their selection? Give it some thought, write it down and commit it to memory. Who knows, God may bring someone your way one day soon who is struggling and in need of the comfort those stories may bring.

Rev. Jack served in the United States Marine Corps including a 13-month deployment in Vietnam (1965-66). After leaving the Marines, he earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and a Certificate in Leadership Management. He retired in 2008 after a 36-year career in the Real Estate Valuation Industry; the last 10 years in corporate management. Prior to retiring, Rev. Jack earned a Master of Art's Degree (MA) in Pastoral Ministry and a Doctorate (D.Min.) in Applied Ministries. After his ordination in November of 2010, Rev. Jack earned a Master of Divinity Degree (M.Div.).

Rev. Jack and his wife Rev. Liz Miller, were married in 2011 and served as *"Equals in Ministry - Equals in Life."* Although retired from active service, both remain in good standing with the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC), Pacific Northwest Diocese, and the First Christian Church - Disciples of Christ (DOC), Northern Lights Region.
