



The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.
Proverbs 29:18

February 19, 2017
English Standard Version

“Where’s the Vision?”

This is the 7th sermon in the series on Biblical Interpretation entitled,
The Most Misused & Misunderstood Verses of the Bible!

Proverbs 29:18

“Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.”

Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us the Scriptures and making us Your people. You have brought us to Your Word to learn more about Your will for our lives. We ask You this morning to give us the grace to understand an often misunderstood verse. It’s misunderstood because we want Your Word to reflect our wills, not Yours, and our wills aren’t easily bent to obedience. We want to listen to our own hearts instead of Yours. We thank You for this Word, and we pray that You would, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, enable us to bow our hearts to its authority, in Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: Visionary Pastor Fails Eye Exam ¹

Sources outside a local eye care center in San Diego report that the lead visionary of the “4U Church”, Mr. Colton Emadi failed an eye exam on Friday. “I’ve never seen a more dismal performance,” eye care center employee Greg Carnicella admitted to reporters afterward. “He couldn’t even handle the top line.”

“I’ve always had such great vision. I tested very strongly for vision on my last spiritual gifts test,” a flummoxed Emadi said in a statement. “After that puff test, though, I could barely

¹ Do you really need to ask? Yes, it’s Christian satire from [The Babylon Bee](#), 12/16/16.

find the exit sign.”

Several parishioners were reportedly disillusioned by the news, as Emadi’s eagle-like vision was what drew them to appealing ministry of the 4U Church. “Scripture says God raises up visionaries for such a time as this,” one church member said. “At least that’s what our visionary says it says.”

Emadi reportedly even has **Proverbs 29:18** — “Without vision the people perish” — tattooed on his right forearm. “That’s my life verse,” Emadi explained in a recent Twitter Q&A. “My people are imperishable.”

At publishing time, it was still unclear whether Emadi’s vision will improve enough to find his way to the qualifications for church leaders in **1 Timothy 3**.

I’m starting to wonder if The Babylon Bee got a hold of our upcoming sermon schedule and are now committed to providing us with weekly illustrations. Either that, or we share the same twisted sense of humor. One of those.

Now, with this week’s verse, **Proverbs 29:18**, there’s actually a few reasons why this verse is so often **misused**. One is that so many Christian speakers and authors are either untrained or just plain lazy and don’t do the work necessary to understand this verse in its original context. Sadly, that’s probably the main reason this verse is **misused**. But secondly, the English language is constantly changing. And that’s why when you go to buy a new Bible, you’re forced to wonder ...

BACKGROUND: Why Are There So Many Different Bibles? ²

This question often surfaces when people pick out a new Bible. There are thinline Bibles, reference Bibles, study Bibles, topical Bibles, and so on and so forth. It’s here where we enter into the world of translation philosophies, the theological angles taken in the study notes, format, print size, color, leather, hardback, thickness, etc. You name it, it’s most likely available.

According to their website, **Family Christian Bookstores** carries 138 Compact Bibles, 57 Devotional Bibles, 67 Large Print Bibles, 47 Reference Bibles, 48 Specialty Bibles, 216 Study Bibles, 54 Teen Bibles, 10 Topical Bibles, 101 Thinline Bibles, and 3 Audio Bibles. And that’s just in the NIV translation.

So, I quickly browsed through the Specialty Bibles and was tempted by ... “The Plans I Have For You Bible.” Sooo tempting ... Perhaps **you** would prefer the Investigator’s Bible, or the Free on the Inside Bible, or maybe the Battlefield of the Mind Bible. Maybe you get (please don’t) the Jesus Calling Bible, **or** the Jesus Calling Bible for Children. Because surely, we want to teach them how to screw up God’s Word from an early age. Now, if you already own one of those Bibles, I apologize. Not trying to make anyone feel guilty. However, if you have one of those Jesus Calling Bibles, I will replace it for you free of charge.

2 The Background and Exposition of the text is adapted from the books, The Most Misused Verses in the Bible, by Dr. Eric Bargerhuff, pages 145-153; Out of Context: How to Avoid Misinterpreting the Bible by Dr. Richard Schultz, pages 61-63; “Proverbs” by Dr. Allan Ross in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Vol. 5), Dr. Frank Gaebelin, ed., pages 1115–1118. Logos Bible Software 7.4; Selling Jesus by Dr. Douglas Webster, pages 55-56, 142; Power Preaching for Church Growth by Dr. David Eby, pages 126-128; Focus on the Bible Commentary: Proverbs – Everyday Wisdom for Everyone by Dr. Eric Lane, pages 367-377; Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament: A Guide for The Church by Dr. Walter Kaiser, pages 15–20. **And the articles, “Where There Is No Vision...” by Tim Challies, Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, CN, 3/9/05, www.challies.com; “Distorting Another Good Verse: Proverbs 29:18” by Dr. Robert McCabe, Professor of Old Testament, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 3/22/13, www.dbts.edu.**

A new believer is bound to be overwhelmed in choosing a Bible without help from someone familiar with all the different translations and paraphrases. But even for longtime Christians, the number of Bible options can be incredibly confusing. Personally, I prefer the more literal word-for-word translation of the English Standard Version and so that's primarily what I preach from.

When I consider the early church and the limited number of copies of the Scriptures available to them, I can't help but be amazed about **how blessed we are** to have so much access to God's Word. We have instant access to it on the Internet ... as well as full copies on our smart phones. But aside from this, there's another excellent question that surfaces from time to time that deserves an answer — Why is it necessary to constantly be updating or coming out with new translations of the Bible?

There are certainly many different reasons, but the best answer is this — **because language changes**. If there's one thing that's always moving, always changing, it's human language. Let me give you an example. What if twenty years ago, I came up to you and asked, "So, are you changing the light bulbs in your house so that you can **go green**?" 20 years ago, that wouldn't have made much sense, and probably would have gotten the response, "What are you talking about? Is going green the same as wearing a Notre Dame T-shirt on St. Patrick's Day?" Well, today you know the answer to that, because now "**going green**" has everything to do with using products that are environmentally friendly ... that limit energy use, minimize waste, encourage recycling, and save natural resources. Therefore, the idea of **going green** is a relatively recent idea, and the word **green** itself has a different set of meanings depending on its context. That's why dictionaries are updated regularly.

And in the same way that words take on new meanings, words can lose or become detached from their former meanings. A few examples of words that have changed meaning over time are **gay** — which used to mean happy; or **awful** — which used to mean awesome; or **talents** — which used to be a measure of weight; or **charity** — which meant love a long time ago. And those old meanings now seem somewhat archaic to us. With all that in mind, it's understandable why it might be necessary to have updated versions of the Bible due to the fact that some English words may have changed or lost their contextual meanings. It's with these thoughts in mind that we turn to our **widely-misused** Bible verse for today, **Proverbs 29:18**. And the first need of the day is for a ...

BETTER MEANING

"Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law."

Here's a case where an archaic usage and understanding of an English word within the King James Version of the Bible has led to so many people **misunderstanding** and **misusing** what is truly a powerful verse of Scripture. Though the King James is still a reliable translation in many ways, readers today often have difficulty in understanding what's being communicated unless they're familiar with its antiquated language. So, let's look first at **Proverbs 29:18** from the King James Version and then I'll explain what's really being said. Here's how the first half of the verse reads, "*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*"

I'm guessing you've heard this verse cited before, and the reason so many quote the King James Version is that it's **convenient** to use its wording to support many contemporary ideas and agendas. Based on a surface reading of it, the verse seems to be talking about *having a vision for a planned out future*. The idea being that if we don't have a plan for success in the immediate

future, then we're bound to fail, or in this extreme case, "*perish.*" **But That's Not What This Verse Means!!** But before we explain what it does mean, let's talk about **vision**.

This notion of having a **vision** is widely used today in many circles. For example, as Americans we often elect politicians to serve in public office based on their **vision** for the country's future. In a slightly different way, companies often sit down as leaders and envision what or where they want their company to be five, ten, or twenty years from now. Then they develop **a vision statement** along with an accompanying strategy and tactics in order to obtain this anticipated future. Even churches today talk about having a **vision** for their church so that all their programs and activities are aimed at a set of clearly defined goals.

The reality is, for many churches, the **vision** becomes much more about the **visionary** than about the church. After all, a good **visionary**, who's an expert in the art of **visioneering** (yes, that's the title of a real book), will build his **brand** using multiple **platforms** in order to cast his **vision** to the widest possible audience. The fact that it almost always has something to do with **money** is completely coincidental, I'm sure. And yes, that's sarcasm.

Many Christian leaders have latched onto this verse, claiming that it provides a biblical basis for the importance of **vision** in leadership. This passage is used, most notably, by leaders within **the church growth movement**. The Pastor of Saddleback Community Church in California has written, "My imagination influences my aspiration. In other words, your dreams determine your destiny. To accomplish anything, you must first have a mission, a goal, a hope, a **vision**. "Without a vision the people perish." Proverbs 29:18."

In his book, Courageous Leadership, the Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago has written, "Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained." They can't focus, can't reach their goal, can't follow their dream. An older translation says, "Without vision, the people perish." I've seen it with my own eyes – without vision, people lose the vitality that makes them feel alive." He writes that "vision is a picture of the future that produces passion."

Now, planning for the future is not necessarily bad, and certainly passion is something with both good and bad intent. But this verse has **nothing** to do with either of those things. Now, in both corporate and church settings – I think most places that write **a vision statement**, end up hanging it on the wall, and everyone keeps on doing what they've always been doing. In case you're still wondering, I think they're simply unbiblical, at least in a church setting.

And yet, when someone finds a passage of Scripture that at first glance may support the idea of needing a **vision**, there is an immediate temptation to grab hold of it and use it. After all, wouldn't it be great to find biblical warrant for this kind of **visionary planning**? Perhaps. I seriously doubt it. But even if that was the case, there's still a major problem with using **this** verse **that** way. Plain and simple, this verse is not talking about having a **vision** for the future. Even though it's tempting to **hijack** this verse to support that idea, it's a clear **misuse** of the author's **original intent**. Which means, first of all, we would do well to use a ...

BETTER TRANSLATION

It is interesting to note that the authors **misusing** this verse all quote the King James Version of **Proverbs 29:18**, which reads "*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*" This is strange in that these men would never preach from the King James, nor would they recommend it for study or devotional reading. So why would they quote from this older translation? The answer becomes clear when we examine other translations, because all you have to do is look in almost **any other translation** of the Bible in order to see what the verse is really saying. In fact,

let's just quickly compare other translations of **Proverbs 29:18** ...

Contemporary English Version — *Without **guidance** from God law and order disappear, but God blesses everyone who obeys his Law.*

Holman Christian Standard Bible — *Without **revelation** people run wild, but one who listens to instruction will be happy.*

New Living Translation — *When people do not accept **divine guidance**, they run wild. But whoever obeys the law is joyful.*

New King James Version — *Where there is no **revelation**, the people cast off restraint; But happy is he who keeps the law.*

New International Version — *Where there is no **revelation**, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law.*

English Standard Version — *Where there is no **prophetic vision** the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.*

Now you can clearly see that some of the more recent translations give a **much different meaning** of what this verse is saying than what we read in the older King James Version. It almost sounds as if the other versions are quoting a different verse, but they're not. I would argue the other translations provide a much better sense of what's being communicated within the original Hebrew text. Four versions use the word **revelation**, and two versions use the word **guidance**.

The ESV (the Excellent, Superior Version) uses the phrase **prophetic vision**, meaning the vision from the prophets ... or what theologians would call "**special revelation**." In other words, the Word of God. When the prophets began to speak, they often started by saying, "**Thus says the Lord ...**" that's **prophetic vision!** This verse is discussing **the divine revelation of God** that has come down to us from heaven. It's about how God has chosen to speak to us by means of **supernatural revelation**, the revelation that was directly given by God to the prophets and apostles who wrote it down for us, which is what our Bible is today, and why we call it **special revelation**.

That's why the Apostle Paul writes in **Ephesians 2:19-21**, "*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.*" And then Paul writes in **2 Timothy 3:16**, "*All Scripture is **breathed out by God** and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*" And the Apostle Peter writes in **2 Peter 1:21**, "*For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were **carried along by the Holy Spirit**.*"

But four hundred years ago, when the King James Version first came out, the English translators of the Bible in 17th Century England chose to use the word **vision** instead of the word **revelation** when referring to God's supernatural communication to His people. This would have been an appropriate translation of the original Hebrew text of Scripture, especially since God communicated to His prophets by means of visions. And the readership of that day would have understood that **vision** meant **revelation**. A number of the prophetic books actually begin that way, with **Obadiah 1:1a** being just one example, "*The vision of Obadiah. Thus says the Lord GOD ...*" There is a direct connection between **vision** and **the word of God**, to the point where they're essentially used as synonyms, as we see in **1 Samuel 3:1**, "*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And **the word of the LORD** was rare in those*

days; there was no frequent vision.”

However, in our modern-day American culture, the word *vision* has many more meanings. It can refer to a person’s eyesight. It can refer to a supernatural experience of divine revelation, and as I have said, it can also refer to having a long-term plan. Here, then, is where things go wrong. The **misuse** of **Proverbs 29:18** arises when we randomly take one of the modern-day uses of the word *vision* (like having a business plan) and illegitimately import that idea back into the biblical text in a way that is **completely foreign to the author’s original intent**. And that’s what has happened with the **misinterpretation** and **misuse** of this verse. It’s being **hijacked** and **misused** all in an effort to support the modern-day idea of the need for a **corporate vision** for an organization (even a church).

I find it interesting that the **New King James Version**, an update to the original King James Version, changes the translation altogether. It now uses the word *revelation* instead of the word *vision*. I can’t help but wonder if the scholars who oversaw and implemented the update sought to avoid the common confusion that often surrounds this verse. Perhaps they understood that there’s a ...

BETTER CONTEXT

“Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.”

One of the problems with people **misusing** this verse is that they remove it from its context. First of all, they hardly ever finish the verse. The King James renders the rest of the verse as follows, *“but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.”* The ESV says *“but blessed is he who keeps the law.”* The word **“but”** contrasts something between the first and second half. Obviously, what’s being contrasted is those who **cast off restraint** when there is no revelation from God with those who **keep the Law** regardless. This verse warns against turning away from the revelations of God and promises blessing to those who honor and obey His Word.

The entire Book of Proverbs confirms this understanding. If you look at all the other Proverbs that talk about being blessed you will see that being blessed by God means walking on a path where the worst evils cannot reach us, living a life that will command respect and esteem, abiding under the wing of God the Father’s favor, and spending our life in serving others.

But there’s more to the overall context, much more, because Proverbs 29 is ultimately about **Justice** – both Divine Justice and National Justice. Proverbs 29 teaches us that Divine Justice is given to obstinate sinners (v. 1), habitual sinners (v. 6), to the proud (v. 23), and to those who don’t trust God (v. 25). National Justice or Public Righteousness is maintained where there is happiness and blessing (v. 2 and the end of chapter 28), where there is stability (vv. 4, 14), and where there is social concern for each other (v. 7).

Then we learn that justice breaks down where there is instability (v. 8), where there is deception (v. 12), where there is corruption (v. 16), and **where restraint has been cast off** (v. 18, our verse for today). And there’s more on Domestic Justice (how we treat our family) and Personal Justice (how our emotions and words govern our relationships). And our verse, about God’s revelation and our obedience to that revelation are right in the middle of the chapter on **Justice**. You might say ... Where there is no divine revelation, the people cast off restraint, and there is no justice. However, where there is divine revelation, and the people are living in obedience to it, then there is justice.

It’s possible that a brief, careless reading of one translation of the Bible could lead to confusion as to this verse’s meaning. But for anyone who rightly handles the Word of God,

paying attention to the **context**, and to **the original meaning** of the specific words used, then the meaning of this verse becomes obvious. This verse says nothing of the importance of having a church that is led by vision or a visionary. Ironically, this verse should underscore the importance of **honoring God's revelation**, and warn those who would water it down by sloppy or deliberate **misuse**. One last question for us this morning ...

CONCLUSION: *What About Perishing?*

Vision, according to the church-growth authors, is an integral part of church leadership. A leader who does not cast **vision**, leads his church towards destruction. Which sounds bad for you. The words "*the people perish*" is often interpreted by proponents of church growth to mean that churches without clear vision will lose members and be unable to grow numerically. But is that conclusion supported by this verse? I don't think so. So, what does it mean to say that without **prophetic vision**, or without **divine revelation**, the people *cast off restraint*? Let me try to apply a Biblical example here.

When we're regularly reading and studying the Bible, the Holy Spirit uses that discipline to build us up and strengthen us in the faith. As our minds become fortified by the truths of God's Word, we learn how to think more like God. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit uses the power of God's Word to help us in our victory over sin. **Psalm 119:11** says, "*I have stored up Your Word in my heart, that I might not sin against You.*"

What this means is that when God's Word is fixed in our hearts, it enables us to sort out right from wrong and enables us to practice **restraint** whenever we are tempted to sin. One can easily say that when God's Word is heeded and obeyed, it has protective value. It protects us from evil thoughts and behaviors and helps shape our moral boundaries so that we know how to live a life that pleases God. **On the other hand**, when God's Word is ignored or just missing from someone's life, this ability to sort out right from wrong and to practice **restraint** is limited or just absent. And then we're bound to fail and fall into sinful patterns. And this is what the writer of this proverb meant when he said, "*Where there is no prophetic vision [revelation] the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law [God's Word].*"

An example of this from the Bible can be found in **Exodus 32** where we read, **Exodus 32:25**, "*And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies).*" **Perish, broken loose**, and **cast off restraint** all translate the same Hebrew word. Here in **Exodus** it's used in the sense that the Israelites were unrestrained, once the moral restraints had been removed; that is, they showed no moral restraint while Moses was up on Mount Sinai. Essentially, it became a mob scene of excess immorality.

Of course, when Moses came down and saw what was going on, we read, **Exodus 32:26-28**, "*Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, 'Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me.' And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'*"²⁷ **And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell.**" **Casting off restraint** can lead to deadly consequences, and can, in fact, lead to the people **perishing**. So, if you hear me calling for the Sons of Levi, start running, because it is not going to end well.

Let me give you another example of how this proverb can be applied and essentially rings true in our culture today. You can think of almost any moral issue today – be it abortion, same sex marriage, promiscuous sexuality on college campuses, corporate lying on annual reports, or

politicians spinning their version of events so it looks better for their political party, whatever ...

This makes the proverb essentially **prophetic**, for its describing the current state of affairs in a secular culture that has little regard for the Word of God and shows an increasing disinterest in practicing moral restraint. It amazes me how much Scripture still speaks to and describes sinful human nature today, even thousands of years after it was written.

In conclusion, the Bible rightly understood and applied has a way of **protecting** us, setting our moral compass, and **restraining** us from sinful patterns. It teaches us right from wrong and helps us to become **discerning** in our quest to please God in all things. Hopefully, it's obvious by now that the main point of this verse is our **obedience** to the Word of God and not about failed dreams or the size of the congregation. The true growth of the church is not dependent on either a vision or a visionary, but on our **faithfulness** to the Word of God.

The point is that we do not live by our wits, our intelligence, our grandchildren, or even our degrees; we do, however, live *by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*. That is **the only source** of authority and health for the body of Christ. All else leads to the shambles we are seeing in so many quarters today. We don't need to compete for the world's attention as much as we need men and women whose quiet lives, Biblical convictions, and Christ-like character authentically represent the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in the end, the greatest blessing of keeping the Law, the greatest blessing of the Gospel ... is that **we gain Christ!** Blessed indeed is the one who believes, keeps, and follows God's law. Those who do so reveal their true King! Take that to heart ... You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Dear heavenly Father, we commit ourselves to You this day. Lord, Your Word is so much bigger than we are. We ask that You would reveal to us the truth of Your Word, that You would give us hearts to obey it. Help us not to be like those who ignore Your Word and cast off restraint. Give us restraint, Lord Jesus. Give us contentment in You. Let us rejoice in the great blessing of keeping the law, believing the gospel, gaining Christ and being found in Him.

If there are those who have come here this morning unsure about Your Word, or uncertain of the blessing found in Christ, reveal Yourself to them through Your Word and by Your Spirit. Glorify Yourself in Your Word and in our hearts, and we give You all the praise and all the glory, for we ask it in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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1 Peter 1:22-25

#3Mverses

*“Having purified your souls by your **obedience to the truth** for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”*