

# Behind *the* Mask



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Prov. 25:2, 3; 26:11, 12; 1 Cor. 1:20, 21; Prov. 26:13–16; 27:5, 6.*

**Memory Text:** “Do not exalt yourself in the presence of the king, and do not stand in the place of the great” (*Proverbs 25:6, NKJV*).

**B**ehind the dazzling serpent, who utters sweet words and who seems so concerned with Eve's happiness, hides the enemy who plots her death (*Gen. 3:1–6*). Disguised as “an angel of light,” Satan prepares the most dangerous traps for humankind (*2 Cor. 11:14*). Even more dangerous and deceitful is self-pretension; when we claim to be what we are not, we end up cheating others and even ourselves.

There are different ways to deceive. One of the most common is through language. Some of the proverbs this week deal with words, lying words, flattering words, pretty words that use nice sounds and wonderful sentiments to cover ugly thoughts and intentions. We need to be careful not only about what we say to others but about how we interpret what others say to us. Perhaps this week's message could be summed up this way: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (*Matt. 10:16*).

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 7.

## The Mystery of God

Life is full of mysteries. Physicist David Deutsch wrote that “everyday events are stupendously complex when expressed in terms of fundamental physics. If you fill a kettle with water and switch it on, all the supercomputers on Earth working for the age of the universe could not solve the equations that predict what all those water molecules will do—even if we could somehow determine their initial state and that of all the outside influences on them, which is itself an intractable task.” —David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Transform the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011), Kindle edition, locations 1972–1975.

If we are confounded about something as mundane as water molecules, how could we even begin to expect to understand the mysteries of God?

**Read** Proverbs 25:2, 3. What point is the author making, and how can we apply it to a broader situation?

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What makes the glory of God different from the glory of kings is His “mysterious” nature and by implication our human incapacity to fully understand Him. The Hebrew root *str* (“conceal,” “hide”), from which comes our word *mystery*, is often used in the Hebrew Scriptures to characterize what makes God the only true God (*Isa. 45:14, 15*). There are things about God that we simply cannot understand. On the other hand, what makes the glory of kings is their willingness to be scrutinized. Transparency and accountability should be the first quality of leadership (*Deut. 17:14–20*). It is the king’s duty to “search out a matter”; that is, to give an explanation for events and for what he is doing.

**Life is so full of unanswered questions, isn’t it? In a split second, seemingly random events can mean the difference between life and death. Some people go from one tragedy to another, while others do fine. All this should tell us that we need to live by faith. What things are happening right now in your life that you have to accept by faith, trusting in God? What other choice do you have?**

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## The Fool as Wise

Though not a recent fabrication (especially in the Western world), the idea has taken hold in recent years that argues for the relative nature of truth. That is, what is true for one person, or one culture, might not be true for another. While on one level this is always correct (some places drive on the right side of the road, others on the left), on another it's a dangerous error, especially in the moral realm. Certain things are right and others are wrong, regardless of where we live or our personal preferences. In the end, we must always submit our views to the Word of God and the truths found there. God's Word must be our ultimate source for knowing right and wrong, good and evil.

**Read Proverbs 26:11, 12.** (See also *Judg. 21:25; 1 Cor. 1:20, 21; 2:6, 7; 2 Cor. 1:12.*) **What must we all be careful not to do?**

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As we can see, this idea of doing what is right in one's own eyes is nothing new. Yet, it was as wrong then as it is now. As we have already seen, none of us understands everything; in fact, we don't fully understand *anything*. We all have areas where we need to grow and learn; so, we should always be open to the fact that we don't have all the answers.

In the case of fools, as seen in this proverb, the reason to be concerned is that the influence of their folly will go beyond themselves. They are now more convinced than ever of their wisdom; they will therefore repeat their folly. They may even be so convincing that others will think they are wise, will honor them, and consult them for advice, which can lead to big problems (*Prov. 26:8*). Folly will spread, but labeled as "wisdom," it can be that much more damaging. Furthermore, fools are so foolish that they are not aware of their folly.

**How often are you tempted to compromise on what you know are core values, core truths? What happens, however, when certain core values collide? How can we know which ones trump the others?**

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## The Sluggard

**“The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth”** (*Prov. 26:15, NIV*).

Just as with students who spend more time and energy preparing to cheat on an exam than studying for it, it is ironic that lazy people work hard to find excuses for their laziness!

**Read** Proverbs 26:13–16. What are we being warned about here?

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The lazy person may be right: “There is a lion in the road!” (*Prov. 26:13, NKJV*). Therefore, it is wiser to stay at home and not to confront the danger. But by doing just that, we miss all the opportunities that life offers. We will never enjoy the beauty of the rose if we do not run the risk of being hurt by its thorns. We will not be able to move forward if we are afraid of obstacles. People who do not dare to commit themselves will never taste the fullness of life.

Look at some of the other imagery in those verses. Just as the door swings on its hinges but doesn’t go anywhere, lazy people turn in their beds; that is, they just change position but don’t go anywhere, either.

The other image, in verse 15, is even more startling. They can get their hands into a dish of food *but are too lazy to bring them back to feed themselves*.

But even worse is their intellectual laziness, their closed-mindedness and certainty about their own positions. Therefore, they will always be right, wiser than seven wise men (*vs. 16*), and will not be open to other views, perhaps wiser than their own. Those who think they have all the answers usually don’t.

**“In the judgment men will not be condemned because they conscientiously believed a lie, but because they did not believe the truth, because they neglected the opportunity of learning what is truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 55. How do we understand our role in giving others the “opportunity” to learn what is truth? Where does our responsibility begin, and where does it end?**

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## The Friend as Enemy

If we are more disappointed by our friends than by our enemies, it is because we expect good from our friends and evil from our enemies. It doesn't always work out that way, though, does it? That's why Proverbs warns us that sometimes a friend behaves like an enemy and an enemy like a friend.

### **Read** Proverbs 27:5, 6. When can rebuke be a sign of love?

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Love is not just about kisses and sweet words. Love will sometimes oblige us to rebuke our friend or our child, and it can run the risk of appearing unpleasant, judgmental, and critical. We might even lose friends if we speak out. Yet, if we do not warn our friends about what they are doing, especially if it will bring them harm, then what kind of friend are we?

Open rebuke is also a sign that our love is not built on illusion and pretension but is based on truth and on trust.

### **Read** Proverbs 27:17. What can be the effect of confrontation between friends?

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The image of iron sharpening iron suggests a reciprocal benefit. Friendship tested by true confrontation will improve not only the quality of the friendship but also stimulate and strengthen both personalities. The respective weapons will gain in efficiency. We will end up more equipped for our future struggles. People who take refuge in themselves and their own ideas only, and never confront the challenge of different views, will not grow in knowledge or in character.

**Have you ever been rebuked for something that could have really hurt you? Suppose you hadn't been warned about it? Keeping this in mind, if you need to do the same for someone else, how can you do it in a redemptive manner rather than in a judgmental and critical way?**

## The Enemy as Friend

**Read** Proverbs 26:17–23. On the lines below, summarize what is being said.

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Proverbs, again, gets into the power of words, this time dealing with the harm caused by slander and quarreling. Those who slander your enemy before your face, to make you think they're on your side, are really like "charcoal": they feed the quarrel and lead you into the fire of more troubles (*vs. 21, NKJV*).

Likewise "fervent lips," which sound so eloquent, can hide a "wicked heart" (*vs. 23, NKJV*). The politician who wants to be elected, the salesman who wants to sell his wares, the playboy who wants to seduce a woman—all of them know about the power of eloquence.

This passage's lesson is that we should be careful not to believe in every nice speech we hear. They can be dangerous precisely because they are nice. Some people are very good speakers; they can sound so persuasive, so sincere, and so caring, when inside, something completely different is going on. Though we have all been victims of people like this, who hasn't at some point been guilty of doing the same thing: saying one thing to a person but thinking or feeling something completely different? Proverbs, here, speaks strongly against this deceptiveness.

"Everything that Christians do should be as transparent as the sunlight. Truth is of God; deception, in every one of its myriad forms, is of Satan. . . . It is not a light or an easy thing to speak the exact truth. We cannot speak the truth unless we know the truth, and how often preconceived opinions, mental bias, imperfect knowledge, errors of judgment, prevent a right understanding of matters with which we have to do! We cannot speak the truth unless our minds are continually guided by Him who is truth."—Ellen G. White, *Reflecting Christ*, p. 71.

**How open and transparent are you in what you say? How much of a disconnect, if any, is there between your words and your thoughts? Do you really think that such duplicity can be maintained indefinitely? (See Matt. 10:26, 27.)**

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**Further Study:** “The agency of the Spirit of God does not remove from us the necessity of exercising our faculties and talents, but teaches us how to use every power to the glory of God. The human faculties, when under the special direction of the grace of God, are capable of being used to the best purpose on earth. Ignorance does not increase the humility or spirituality of any professed follower of Christ. The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve Him intelligently. The great object of education is to enable us to use the power which God has given us in such a manner as to represent the religion of the Bible and promote the glory of God.

“We are indebted to Him who gave us existence, for the talents that have been entrusted to us, and it is a duty we owe our Creator to cultivate and improve these talents.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, pp. 361, 362.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1** Discuss more about the mysteries that we find in everyday life, whether in nature, in human interactions, or in questions about faith and the nature of God and salvation. It’s one of the great ironies of life that the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. Why is that even more true when it comes to spiritual truths?
- 2** What are some “truths” that are, indeed, relative, cultural, and changing? How do we distinguish them from truths that are eternal, universal, and immutable? Why is it so important that we know the difference between them? Why is the confusion of contingent truths with eternal truths one of the great dangers we face?
- 3** It has been said that smart people keep their friends close and their enemies closer. What does that mean? As Christians, how are we to relate to such a sentiment? In what way can Matthew 10:16 help?

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Proverbs 25:2, 3; 26:11–16; 27:5, 6*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Review some of the complex problems of sinful human life and realize divine wisdom is needed to help deal with them.

**Feel:** Rejoice in the blessing of God’s understanding and the help available in His Word for dealing with life as it really is.

**Do:** Choose to gratefully accept God’s Word as the source of wisdom for dealing with moral issues and decisions constantly faced.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: We Are Not in Heaven Yet.**

**A** Life is confusing. People can’t always be trusted, and much suffering is unexplainable.

**B** Proverbs 25 and 26 provide insight into common predicaments, giving practical wisdom. In what ways is the counsel in Proverbs very contemporary?

**II. Feel: A New Hunger to Live by God’s Word**

**A** If God’s Word can be trusted, how should its principles be applied?

**B** If God seems distant during difficult times, how can we find Him?

**III. Do: Recalling God’s Blessings in Difficult Times**

**A** How can one confidently face the future amid life’s confusion?

**B** Recall past experiences in which God has blessed and/or helped resolve confusing experiences. Talk to others who have found God’s help, and learn from their struggles. In what ways can their experiences fill you with hope and courage?

**C** Why is it hard to sing praises to God when you are discouraged?

► **Summary:** If one is discouraged and/or dealing with unresolved problems, what is the best thing to do? Studying the practical counsel in Proverbs 25 and 26 and learning from testimonies of others who have worked through painful experiences can help provide wisdom in day-to-day life. Above all, seek the promised blessing from the “God of all comfort” (*2 Cor. 1:3*).



## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Proverbs 25:2, 3; 26:11, 12*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** The book of Proverbs describes different kinds of characters, including fools, lazy people, and friends (good and bad), reminding us that character qualities are more than skin deep and affect more than the person who has them.

**Just for Teachers:** This week’s lesson reminds us that the outward appearance of a person does not always match the inner reality. Inwardly, a person can be deceptive and foolish, for example. Awareness of this discrepancy can teach each of us to strive for a life in which the outward appearance matches the inner nature, reflecting God’s consistently truthful and loving character.

**Opening Activity:** Ask class members to recall a time when a friend was painfully honest and how that affected them. Also, ask them to think of a time when they had to be honest with a friend and how difficult that was to do. Jesus, though loving to everyone, was honest with people, and His honesty was sometimes received negatively.

**Consider This:** Though a prisoner of war and (most likely) a teenager, Daniel bravely spoke honestly to his Babylonian captors regarding his diet: “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself” (*Dan. 1:8, NKJV*). God blessed Daniel’s decision: “Now God had brought Daniel into the favor and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs” (*vs. 9, NKJV*). This text can encourage us as we make moral choices. In Scripture, who are some of the characters that, in the midst of suffering, brought honor to God?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** The book of Proverbs can be seen as an “ethical textbook” written by the wisest man who ever lived. Ultimately, moral situations that humans face do not vary over the centuries, making the counsel in Proverbs still very contemporary.

## Bible Commentary

### I. Behind the Mask (*Review Proverbs 25:1–3 with your class.*)

God Himself detests dishonesty of any kind: “These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren” (*Prov. 6:16–19, NKJV*). Notice that lying is mentioned two times in this short list! Perhaps God’s loathing of lying stems, in part, from that first lie in Eden, a lie that maligned His character—a lie that is at the heart of the long-standing great controversy between Christ and Satan.

**Consider This:** What lessons can we learn from Daniel in being gracious as we choose to follow the ways of God? In the book of Proverbs, we are counseled to be wary of fools. How can a person be sensitive to discern character but still be accepting of all people?

### II. “The Mystery of God” (*Review Proverbs 25:2 with your class.*)

God’s understanding is beyond ours, and He is beyond our understanding. However, His incomprehensibility doesn’t excuse us from learning all we can about Him. Indeed, His Written Word tells us He wants us to know Him. Though He cannot explain everything fully to us presently (just as any parent cannot to his or her small children), He promises that someday we will see Him face-to-face and that He will help us understand many things in this life (including suffering) that are presently unexplainable.

“O the mystery of godliness—God manifest in the flesh! This mystery increases as we try to comprehend it. It is incomprehensible, and yet human beings will allow worldly, earthly things to intercept the faint view it is possible for mortals to have of Jesus and His matchless love. . . . How can we be enthusiastic over earthly, common things and not be stirred with this picture—the cross of Calvary, the love that is revealed in the death of God’s dear Son . . . ?

“I shall, if saved in the kingdom of God, be constantly discerning new depths in the plan of salvation. All the redeemed saints will see and appreciate as never before the love of the Father and the Son, and songs of praise will burst forth from immortal tongues. He loved us, He gave His life for us. With glorified bodies, with enlarged capacities, with hearts made pure, with lips undefiled, we shall sing the riches of redeeming love.”—Ellen G. White, *Maranatha*, p. 318.

**Consider This:** How does studying the life of Christ and His great sacrifice enlarge your perspective of God’s character? How does such study motivate your moral life and enable patience and faith in the face of troubling situations?

### III. The Fool as Wise *(Review Proverbs 26:11–16 with your class.)*

We must never forget our human limitations. There is a gulf between human perception and divine reality. The ancient Greeks thought this unbridgeable gulf was caused by spirit and matter. Biblical writers teach us that the gulf between human and divine is caused by sin. We are very prone to error in our thinking, needing the true knowledge that comes from God and His Word.

**Consider This:** What might be some of the reasons the modern mind is resistant to the wisdom found in Scripture? Solomon, the wisest man, seems to have pondered this conundrum as he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. He honestly admits that life is difficult to understand but that the only hope is to fear and obey God (*Eccles. 12:13, 14*).

### IV. Friend as Enemy Versus Enemy as Friend *(Review Proverbs 27:5, 6, 17–23 with your class.)*

Being truthful is sometimes hard, whether with parents, children, spouse, friends, or business associates. Therefore, we are pointedly instructed with the following: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor detest His correction; for whom the LORD loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights” (*Prov. 3:11, 12, NKJV*).

This scripture offers guidance when seeking to administer discipline and correction. If it is necessary to speak a painful sentiment, it should be done tenderly, with the aim to help: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend”—in contrast to deceitful insincerity, which hides true feelings: “But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (*27:6, NKJV*). Also, “Blows that hurt cleanse away evil, as do stripes the inner depths of the heart” (*20:30, NKJV*).

**Consider This:** What lessons can be learned from the struggles, victories, and friendships of our spiritual forebears in both the Old and New Testaments (for example, Ruth and Naomi, Hannah and Elkanah, David and Jonathan, Paul and Barnabas, and so on)?

## ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Sometimes because of suffering, either our own or of those we love or because of unjust treatment, it is often hard to believe that God is with us. What are some things a person can do to be reaffirmed

**in his or her faith during difficult times? What can a person do to encourage someone who is discouraged and losing his or her faith in God?**

**Thought Question:** Though called by Christ to love our enemies and do good to those that hate us, this does not mean allowing ourselves to be duped by a fool. How can we be wary of phony friendships and still be accepting of all people?

Christ wanted to be close to those whom He made in God's image, even before sin. After they sinned, He sought after them, revealing His loving nature.

"Keep your wants, your joys, your sorrows, your cares, and your fears before God. You cannot burden Him; you cannot weary Him. He who numbers the hairs of your head is not indifferent to the wants of His children. 'The Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.' James 5:11. His heart of love is touched by our sorrows and even by our utterances of them. Take to Him everything that perplexes the mind. Nothing is too great for Him to bear, for He holds up worlds, He rules over all the affairs of the universe. Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for Him to notice. There is no chapter in our experience too dark for Him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for Him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of His children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy cheer, no sincere prayer escape the lips, of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest. 'He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.' Psalm 147:3. The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 100.

**Application Questions:** Does having Jesus as a Friend inspire the kind of friend you are and the friendships you have? How have your friendships helped you to understand the love of God?

## ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** **Have the class discuss the ways in which God has personally blessed specific incidents in their lives and, as a result, helped them to become more sensitive to other people and their problems.**

**Activity:** Discuss spiritual, political, and personal situations currently needing resolution and how the example of Jesus can help us to know how to do this. Review how God has opened your eyes to the blessings hidden (at first) in difficult, even painful, experiences.