

The Dead Are There *Proverbs 9:18*

“He knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell.”

The several verses of which verse 18 is the final statement speaks of “Folly’s enticement”. Here we can see that, as in other passages, “Folly”, too, is personified, here as a foolish woman, and those who choose her instead of our Lord court death and hell. Solomon was very good at painting pictures of what it was that he was trying to get across to us. He sought to draw either pictures or to use, as here, personification concerning human attributes that are familiar to us so we can readily grasp his point. These verses are not intended to be demeaning to women in general, but apply to a certain type of woman, the foolish and immoral woman.

It is important that we see this last verse in its’ context:

¹³ *The woman Folly is loud;
she is undisciplined and without knowledge.*

¹⁴ *She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the highest point of the city,*

¹⁵ *calling out to those who pass by,
who go straight on their way.*

¹⁶ *“Let all who are simple come in here!”
she says to those who lack judgment.*

¹⁷ *“Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious!”*

¹⁸ *But little do they know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of the grave.*

As we have said, verse 9:13–18 These last six verses stand as the counterpart to verses 1–6. Like a Woman, Wisdom, Woman Folly finds the most prominent place in the city to issue her invitation (v. 14; cf. v. 3). She issues the same invitation as Woman Wisdom, “Let all who are simple come in here!” (v. 16; cf. v. 4). Whereas Woman Wisdom calls on individuals to leave simplicity, Woman Folly invites them to capitalize on it and develop this “quality.”

We see the reference to “**A foolish woman**”; literally, *the woman of folly*, the genitive being that of apposition, so that this may well be rendered, in order to make the contrast with Wisdom more marked, “the woman Folly.” She is regarded as a real person; and between her and Virtue man has to make his choice. “**Is clamorous**”; turbulent and animated by passion (as ch. 7:11), quite different from her calm, dignified rival. She is **simple**; Hebrew, “simplicity,” in

a bad sense; she has no preservative against evil, no moral fibre to resist temptation. **And knoweth nothing** which she ought to know. Ignorance is the natural accompaniment of Folly; in this case it is wilful and persistent; she goes on her way reckless of consequences. Septuagint, “A woman foolish and bold, who knows not shame, comes to want a morsel.”

So she is boisterous and restless. She is easily distracted, her attention span short. Unlike Woman Wisdom who is clear about her purpose and actively pursues it, Woman Folly is inactive. She does not build a house; she does not prepare a meal because the food she offers is stolen (v. 17). She only sits at the door of her house (v. 14). Hers is a dysfunctional world.

In order to entice the simple, Folly quotes a proverb that sums up what she has to offer, “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!” (v. 17). What she offers is the titillating opportunity to defy the norms of the community and cross over boundaries to challenge authority. She offers a risk and an adventure not dissimilar to what the gang offered the youth in 1:8–19 (especially vv. 11–14). There is something exhilarating about the feeling that one can get away with an activity that is “off limits” or outside the boundaries. It gives one a sense of power, a false sense of freedom.

“Stolen water” can refer to adultery. In 5:15–17, water is used as a metaphor for the sexuality of the wife (cf. also with S of S 4:13–15), but the metaphor here is broader than a reference to sexuality. It has to do with a whole lifestyle characterized by greed and deception. Yet this lifestyle, in stark contrast to Wisdom, ends in death (v. 18).

The two women depicted in chapter 9 represent the two choices set before youth: life and death. If one chooses the banquet of Wisdom, then one follows the path of learning and growing and moral development. It is a nutritious meal that leads to a healthy life. If one chooses Folly’s banquet then one has chosen a feast that by all appearances looks good. However, it is a meal loaded with sweets and containing little nutrition. In fact, the meal is toxic. In the chapters that follow, a more detailed description is given of the two banquets. The sentence literature in chapters 10:1–22:16 lays out the specifics of what is found on the table of each host.

The end of the first major section of Proverbs (1:8–9:18) and it closes with a description of where the foolish way will end: although the one who heeds “*Folly’s*” call typically does not know it, but he wants it clear that, knowing or not, her way ends in death (cf. 7:27; 8:36). He refers to anyone who turns aside and follows the woman Folly (see 9:13). Like the adulterer, the flattering words of folly lead to death (see 2:18, 19; 5:5; 7:21–23, 26, 27). The force of the contrast with the end of the way of wisdom throughout this section makes the point clear that this refers not simply to physical death but to the spiritual reality bound up with where that path is headed.

So the teachings of the first eight chapters are summarized, as both wisdom (vv. 1–6) and folly (vv. 13–18) invite men to a banquet to partake of their benefits. Folly’s dinner *guests* end up *in the depths of the grave* (Hebrew *in*

Sheol), in contrast to the reward for Wisdom's *guests*. This verse therefore looks back to the two tempters—the man who draws the youth into a life of crime and the woman who draws him into promiscuity. Both are in the house of Woman Folly, and both draw more victims to the banquet of the dead in *Sheol*.

We can conclude that the basic idea is that if we pursue and allow ourselves to be seduced by a form of life, pleasant or not, that lacks and does not put into place wisdom, we will find ourselves with a result that is like having a relationship with an adulteress, with all of the hypothetical descriptions that the end of this section contained earlier. Despite the fact that there is some temporal pleasantness" engaged in, the end result is one far more horrible than good. These results are described at the middle to the end of verse 18 as being among the dead in the grave and finding oneself in the place of judgment unexpectedly with no way of changing this final situation.

By way of rehearsing our interpretation - With these words the first division of the Proverbs closes. Wisdom and Folly have both uttered their invitations. The first is personified as a chaste queen; the second as a brazen harlot. Each takes pains to address arguments and offer inducements to the passers-by. But the first invites to a spiritual banquet within a temple, and offers life to the soul at the cost of present self-denial. The other invites to a feast of sensuality in her own house, which is, indeed, the abode of death. The temptations of Folly embrace every kind of sinful self-indulgence, its great attraction being that it is forbidden, and must be enjoyed secretly. But no doubt sins of impurity are here specially alluded to, and this passage may be compared with that in ch. 7:7, etc.; and the words before us with verse 27, "Her house is the way to hell."

We can see several illustrations to be drawn from Solomon's teaching here:

1. Death in life is said to be the portion of all who choose "*the pleasures of sin for a season*," rather than the life-giving privileges of the Christian.
2. Thus our Lord speaks of those who have "*a name to live, but are dead*" (Rev. 3:1); and St. Paul of one who, living in pleasure, "*is dead while she liveth*" (1 Tim. 5:6).
3. Samson and David, and Solomon himself, all hearkened to the invitation of the syren, and for a while at least, became her guests in the depths of hell.
4. Augustine, an inmate at one time of the same dead-house, bewails his folly, and owns that, as a boy, he was tempted to rob an orchard, not for the gain of the fruit, but for the mere pleasure of *sin as sin*—of doing what was forbidden secretly.

By way of application let us remember that such temptations are "*common to man*." That they meet those who go "*right on their ways*," even in the path of duty, as well as others who go to seek them. That the "*simple*" may fall, no less than "*scorners*"—absence of religious principle, as well as positive irreligion, being alike dangerous. The void in the heart will be filled by Folly if not by Wisdom. To some the mere offer is enough: "*Turn in hither*." To others, whose conscience suggests, "*It is forbidden*," the tempter whispers, "*So much the*

sweeter;” or “It must be done secretly, and will be the more exciting.” But let me ask myself, “Is there such a thing as secret sin?” And again, “With life and glory set before me, shall I choose death, and shame, and the depths of hell?”

Lord, show me Thyself, the true Wisdom, that, haviny tasted of Thy sweetness, I may abhor sinful delights!
