

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDY IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

### PART ONE – INTRODUCTION TO A VERY WISE MAN

The book immediately declares its writer, Solomon, king of Israel, who was responsible for the first 24 chapters. Five further chapters, 25-29, were the words of Solomon, treasured for nearly 300 years before being included in the book by scribes in the time of King Hezekiah. The final two chapters are the work of men otherwise unknown to us but of such a quality that they deserved to be part of this book.

The author of every Bible book is the Holy Spirit,(II Tim.3:16,17) but He used around 40 different men to express His message, each one with a distinct style and history. Every one of them demonstrated the wisdom of God. It is profitable wherever the writer is identified to ask what process God used to shape him and his work. We can then ask what processes the Lord is using to prepare us for His purpose and ministry. With Solomon the foundation of his special contribution is evident. In I Kgs.3, he asked God for an understanding heart to judge God's people and to discern between good and evil. The Lord was delighted with his choice and promised him an extraordinary wisdom which would not be equalled until the arrival of Jesus Christ.

It is still worthwhile to ask just how did God shape this man to be a vehicle for His wisdom. Who was influential in his life? What did he read? What did he observe in the world around him? What work did he do which left an indelible impression in his mind? The first major source of his work was the Psalms, most of which are the words of his father, David. Solomon quoted the Psalms very frequently. He spoke often in the early chapters to an unnamed son whom he hoped would listen to his message. It is to be presumed that he spent much time listening to his own father and weaving what he learned into his writing. Very early in the book he urged his son to listen to not only his father but his mother. We know from I Kings 1:11-31 how protective Bathsheba was of her son, Solomon. It is reasonable to assume she taught him much about life. Perhaps it was from Bathsheba that Solomon adopted, in chapters 7-9, the image of wisdom and folly being two women competing for the attention of a young man .

Unlike his father David, Solomon had not had to fight endless battles against numerous enemies. Those conflicts and the betrayal of former friends had inspired some of David's deepest ideas. For Solomon it was probably the stories of faithfulness or failure which the king heard from endless subjects who presented themselves before him which prompted much of his writing. Stories like that of the two harlots both claiming the same baby between whom he had to judge in I Kgs.3:16-28 taught him so much about devious human behaviour. Though he lived his entire life among affluence and privilege, he was deeply aware of the struggles of the poor.

In Deuteronomy,(17:18-20) Moses instructed the people of Israel about the time much later in their history when they would have a king. He told them that their kings were to have a copy of the book of the Law, Deuteronomy, always beside them as a guide to their lives and judgements. Solomon quoted this book very often, pointing strongly to the

assumption that he, most likely following the example of his father David, did have Deuteronomy at his side.

Another book which must have had a prominent place on Solomon's bookshelves, or scrollshelves, was the book of Job. He quoted from it often. Telling the story of one man's struggle with the meaning of suffering and the bad advice he was given would have had great significance for Solomon because he had many examples of human suffering with which he had to deal.

A further vital source of inspiration for Solomon came from observing Creation, the work of God all around him, which showed wonderful examples of the Lord's wisdom, originality and love.(6:6)

As a teacher Solomon was brilliant. He understood the power of contrast; so many of his proverbs compared extremes to great effect. He knew the value of brevity; most of his thoughts were in a single verse so they would be remembered. He recognised the appropriate use of humour; but he did it without being malicious. He demonstrated the usefulness of illustration; he could leave a simple picture in the mind of his reader.

He was aware of who his audience were; he divided them into three categories, the wise, the simple and the fool. The wise were hungry to learn more and knew how to find answers. They knew how little they knew. The simple were a clean sheet on which anything could be written, good or bad. It is urgent to feed them truth before someone else poisons them. The fool was unteachable because he thought he already knew everything. Solomon was convinced of the power of the word of God to change first thinking and then behaviour. He knew that the starting point was 'the fear of the Lord',(1:7) the overwhelming realisation that though of myself I know nothing, am nothing and can do nothing, the Lord is waiting to begin a lifelong process of growth in wisdom with all the potential for life transformation.

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Reviewing the lives of David and Solomon, what would have been the most worthwhile lessons father could have passed to son? What part would life example on the one hand and teaching on the other have played in this process? How did our own parents shape our early lives and our view of the world, of God and of our future?
2. What books were important in Solomon's education? How did he use them? What advantages could we have over Solomon when we are growing up? What advantages could we give our own children in their Christian education?
3. What qualities made Solomon such a good teacher? Can we be that good? Which teachers particularly shaped our own development when we were growing up?
4. What was the secret of Solomon's wisdom? How can we have such wisdom today?(I Cor.1:30)