

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDY IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

PART EIGHT – CHAPTERS 22-24 – THE VALUE OF REPETITION IN TEACHING

Solomon was a wise teacher. He returns over and over to key themes. As a man with brilliant God-given insight he understood the value of repetition but always with slight variation so that we would need to think his statement through afresh. These next three chapters end Solomon's own writing. He is concerned to conclude with a clear, unforgettable message.

In chapter 22 as a fabulously wealthy man he realised what a challenge it was to be both honest and generous with what we have had entrusted to us by God. He knew what Jesus meant when He said, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' (Lk.18:25)

We can easily forget that the Lord is equally the maker of the rich and the poor.(v.2) He did not do a better job with the rich and successful! Solomon reminds us that humility, not arrogance, can lead to God blessing us with the means to make a difference in the world.(v.4) He knew that in most societies the rich will rule, even in a supposed democracy.(v.7) The rich can be blessed greatly by being generous to the poor.(v.9) Exploiting the poor will eventually destroy us in this life or beyond.(v.16,22,23)

Sometimes but not always poverty is the result of laziness or unwise financial dealings.(v.13,26,27,28) At the same time a reputation for honesty is worth far more than any bank account.(v.1) Skill and hard work will be admired.(v.29) Solomon continues to remind us of how the choice to be wise or a fool begins at home with good teaching.(v.6,15,19,20) Wisdom will lead to prudence which in turn results in avoiding wrong,(v.3,5,24) including the adulteress, folly,(v.14) and refusing to listen to rubbish and futile argument,(v.10) Wisdom also results in having something gracious to say, the right words for the right situation.(v.11,17-19,21)

In chapter 23, Solomon continues to sum up the message of this book considering particularly those who will always be trying to take us away from a wise life. We will have to deal with leaders who will be watching us carefully and will pounce on weakness, for example greed, as a reason to write off our message.(v.1-3) The rich will try to persuade us that theirs is the only way worth living. Watch them carefully and see that eventually it takes them nowhere.(v.4,5) Beware the selfish man who will offer us good food to see how we react but does not care for what happens to us.(v.6-8) Face it. The fool is not interested in the gospel.(v.9) Rocks rather than surveyors' pegs marked a man's land in those days which in turn was part of his identity.(Deut.19:14;27:17; Hos.5:10; Prov.22:28) Land boundaries defined the inheritance a man could pass to his son but land could easily be stolen from children. Wisdom protects our inheritance in Christ.(v.10-12)

Again the word 'rod' is the term for authority not a weapon. As parents our authority is vital to good teaching.(v.13,14) Solomon longs for this relationship to work with his own son knowing that if it does, his son in turn will be able to teach his grandson.(v.15,16) As we live as Christians in a heathen world, envy will be a constant threat leading us to suppose that we are missing out. Lavish living looks glamorous until the morning after. God-given wisdom is our best protection.(v.17-21) Faithful parents will always be worth listening to. Their wisdom is the best inheritance they can pass on to us. If we receive and treasure it they will have enormous satisfaction.(v.22-25) Parents will watch anxiously to see what their children do when the harlot, folly, tries to seduce them with her false message. They can only hope that wisdom wins out.(v.26-28) The chapter ends with a further

warning about the devastating effects of alcohol. In 2012 it still remains the biggest threat to a fulfilling life for a young person – or an older one!(v.29-35)

The final chapter of Solomon's writings contains nothing new yet the same familiar ideas are presented with a fresh twist each time which hits us again. First he returns to the theme of envy of those who seem to have something better than us, but only at the expense of others. Don't join them!(v.1,2) He has more to say on his favourite topic of wisdom. He pictures wisdom as a solidly built and well furnished house. He thinks of the wise man as the Mr Universe of the mind. When such a group of men come together to pool ideas they become an unbeatable army. He sees wisdom as the one force which will close the mouth of the fool in public debate.(v.3-7) By contrast to the wise man the fool uses his mind to think up trouble. He is lazy in difficult times when hard work is needed. Solomon sees him on a path of self-destruction, needing warning of the consequence of sin in the judgement of God.(v.8-12)

Solomon had a sweet tooth. He loved honey! But even more he saw honey as a picture of the wisdom which fed his soul and was the source of his future hope.(v.13,14) He saw it as being what enabled a man to stand up to the wicked and to keep standing up again when we have been knocked down repeatedly.(v.15,16) He warns us not to take satisfaction from the downfall of our enemy because he, not we, may have got it right.(v.17,18) One last time he returns to warn us about envy of the man who may seem to be succeeding but will have to face God.(v.19,20) In particular he identifies the modern passion for change for its own sake, and urges us instead to listen to God and to wise leaders.(v.21,22)

He has yet another warning about justice and honesty. He urges us to confront wrong-doing and compares a truthful answer to a kiss on the lips.(v.23-26) He has good advice for the builder of a house or an idea to prepare our materials or our argument carefully before we start.(v.27) He warns us not to give false evidence. Punishment for wrong doing is God's business not ours.(v.28,29) His message ends with yet one more warning to the lazy who spends too much time in bed instead of out in his fields. He will become poor. His deeper warning is against being too lazy to seek and use the wisdom of God.(v.30-34)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What does chapter 22 have to say about our response to the needs of the poor? How do the wise have a different view of the rich and the poor? What are the warnings to the lazy? How may laziness contribute to poverty? How will being prejudiced against the poor be changed by God's wisdom in us?
2. What are the key issues of chapter 23 which have been repeated throughout the book? What special emphasis does Solomon give to them this time? What more does this chapter have to say about the hopes and responsibilities of parents?
3. What is so destructive about envy? Give examples from your own observations of how envy shapes our behaviour. What pictures does Solomon use to encourage us to listen only to the wisdom of God? What practical aspects of life will be affected when we do?
4. Once more choose one or more verses which have spoken to your heart and life, and memorise them. Can you still remember last week's verses?