

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

PART THREE – CHAPTERS 7-9 – WISDOM AND DOUBT IN LEADERSHIP

Solomon pauses in his lament over his own doubts to offer some wise answers again in the next chapter. He reflects first on death and how though it seems a sad time it can be a good one if a man or a woman has died with a good reputation from which others can learn.(7:1-3) As usual he rebukes the fool who can only think of pleasure which is futile.(7:4-6) Oppression and corruption reveal the difference between the wise and the fool.(7:7-10) He points out the relative value of wisdom and financial prosperity which may both seem to offer us a way out of adversity. Only God's wisdom gives real answers.(7:11-14) In the second half of the chapter, Solomon begins to struggle again over the earthly outcome of wisdom. So often the result of righteousness or wickedness does not seem to be fair. Perhaps we should not be too wholehearted about choosing wisely? Maybe compromise would be better?(7:15-18) Wisdom is a real strength but no-one gets it right all the time. Take for example the hurtful things that any of us say about someone else, including the boss.(7:19-22) After wavering temporarily Solomon commits himself to wisdom again but realises how elusive it is and how much hard searching will be involved. He realises how worthwhile the search for wisdom instead of folly should be.(7:23-25) He makes a mental note of how being ensnared by a woman could so easily rob him of wisdom. Sadly all the women he had met seemed determined to trap him. And tragically eventually they did!(7:26-29)

A new chapter begins with a fresh affirmation of the value of wisdom which can light up a man's face. Solomon then urges obedience and loyalty to the king. But he is the king as well as the preacher so there is some conflict of interest at this point.(8:1-4) He expects the proper protocol to be followed by his subjects when dealing with him. Those who do so will avoid trouble for themselves. But perhaps if Solomon had been less insistent on being obeyed without question some good friends would have dared to remind him of his own God-given wisdom when he was heading for trouble in his own life?(8:5,6) He realises the limits of his own knowledge in, for example, knowing which way the wind will blow tomorrow. He is also very much aware of how authority can be abused.(8:7-9) He reminds us how quickly a godless man will be forgotten once he is dead. He is conscious too of the need for justice to be done without unreasonable delay to give a warning message to others. However long or short our lives, fearing God is the only fulfilling way to go.(8:10-13) Sometimes justice does not seem to happen on earth. The good suffer and the evil seem to get away with it. So maybe we should just live it up today while we have the opportunity?(8:14,15) Jesus pointed out the futility of this approach to earthly life when what we really need is to be rich in heaven.(Lk.12:19-21) Once more Solomon questions his own passionate search for wisdom, realising the pathetic limits of even the smartest human mind. So should we search for wisdom or not?(8:16,17)

In chapter nine Solomon's approach changes. He now says little about vanity or futility but has he answered his own questions? First he summarises the conclusions he has reached. The events of our lives are in God's hands and we have no idea which way they will go. All of us will eventually face the same fate of death. And because all of us have sinned we all

deserve to die. Our hope is in life continuing but it won't. We will all die and be forgotten.(9:1-6) So we might as well live life to the full now. Good food and drink, good clothes and a good woman are our God-given rewards, so enjoy them. Your work is also from God so make the most of it because when you die it is all over.(9: 7-10) Chance, Solomon decides, determines events, not what we would consider justice. He compares the outcomes of life to a fish in a net or a bird being caught in a trap – just wrong place, wrong time.(9:11,12) He has observed remarkable leadership by a poor but wise man who delivers his small city in war but then is forgotten. So wisdom is great but it can all be wrecked by one sinner! Yet again Solomon's wisdom is undermined by doubt because he seems to have no awareness of judgement and life beyond death, and the enjoyment of eternal life beginning now.(9:13-18)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR FURTHER STUDY

1. What comparisons does Solomon draw about our reputation, life and death, humour, wisdom and our reaction to events around us? What do wisdom and money have in common? Which is best and why?(Matt.6:19-24) What issues does he struggle with in the second half of this chapter? How might you have helped him from the New Testament?(chap.7)
2. What attitude to government authority does Solomon commend? Does this apply in our society today?(Rom.13:1-7) How can governments fail and with what effect on people's behaviour? What does he see as the limits of human wisdom?(I Cor.1:18-31; 2:1-13) Again what do we know from the New Testament which would answer Solomon's questions?(chap.8)
3. What is Solomon's view of the effect of chance on our lives? How does he suggest we should behave in the light of this?(Phil.4:11-13) What lesson does he draw from the story of the poor wise man? What has Solomon missed out on from a New Testament point of view?(chap.9)