

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

### PART TEN – CHAPTERS 28-31 – FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Just four chapters remain, two are the words of Solomon, collected and added later, two are by other unknown writers. In chapters 28 and 29 there is a final emphasis on how men treat each other. First there are the poor. How do they behave and how should they be cared for? In chapter 28 we are told that the poor can oppress each other,(v.3) so integrity is important to them as an example to the rich.(v.6) Those who manipulate the financial market will eventually lose it all to those who care for the poor.(v.8) The poor see right through the arrogance of the rich.(v.11) Playing computer games instead of growing food is a sure way to end up poor.(v.19) Being in a hurry to escape poverty is often a way to end up poor.(v.22) Those who give to the poor will somehow be looked after.(v.27) In chapter 29 we are to be concerned that the poor are treated fairly,(v.7) and to remember that the underdog and the bully were both created by God.(v.13)

Secondly there are more messages for leaders about how they use their power. In chapter 28 everyone wants to give orders,(v.2) and some will go to any lengths to have their way.(v.5) Corrupt leadership will self destruct,(v.10) so it is a cause for celebration when good leaders rise up,(v.12) but everyone suffers in tyranny.(v.15) Ordinary people can see the difference.(v.16,28) And again in chapter 29,(v.2) good leadership is recognised to give stability.(v.4) The leader's example will spread down through his team.(v.12,16) How the leader treats the poor will be the ultimate test of his administration.(v.14) Good leadership begins with real vision.(v.18) In the end it will be God who is the only leader we can trust.(v.26)

Chapter 28 has much to say about the character which results from the choice to be wise or a fool. The wicked are cowards,(v.1) and praise each other,(v.4) because they lack God's understanding.(v.5) The greedy son causes great grief to his father,(v.7) because he does not listen to God,(v.9) and leads others into disaster.(v.10) But there is always a way back in confession, repentance and forgiveness.(v.13) The results of the choice are extreme.(v.14,17,18,20) Partiality, favouritism, whether based on race, gender, age or social class, is part of human nature but it is a form of corruption.(v.21) It is not in God's nature and therefore does not belong in the Christian.(Rom.2:11) The wise tell the truth while fools say what they think others want to hear.(v.22) We can fool ourselves into believing that robbing our parents is not stealing.(v.24) It is a simple choice to trust ourselves and cause trouble or trust the Lord and walk safely.(v.25,26)

Chapter 29 continues to describe conflict and how it may or may not be resolved. The fool refuses to listen to wise advice about his mistakes.(v.1) The wise son on the other hand listens and keeps out of trouble.(v.3) Two ways to trap ourselves in conflict are by flattery and by ignoring the law.(v.5,6) Ridiculing others, arguing with fools, violence and losing our tempers are sure ways into conflict.(v.8,9,10,11,22) Letting children get away with rebellion instead of exercising authority over them only leads to worse problems.(v.15,17) Example speaks as loud as words,(v.19) particularly if we have not thought carefully about what to say

first.(v.20) If we treat those who work for us well they may become like sons and daughters.(v.21) The chapter concludes with more ways to get ourselves into strife, our pride,(v.23) co-operating with the dishonest,(v.24) and fearing man instead of God.(v.25) Our choice divides the human race.(v.27)

The final two chapters are a mystery because we are told the names but not the identities of the writers. Clearly they are not written by King Solomon though it would appear that the writers had read the rest of the book and were responding to its message, as we should. The only possible clue to the time of the writing of chapter 30 is the mention of Ithiel in verse 1. Agur and Jakeh were not Hebrew names so they may have been from one of the surrounding nations. Agur was described as 'the oracle' meaning someone through whom God spoke. Ithiel was an ancestor of one of those who returned from captivity in Babylon and resettled Jerusalem.(Neh.11:7) But we have no idea whether he is the same man. His name means 'with me is God'. Ucal means 'eat' which does not help us!

Agur begins by acknowledging that he knows nothing but he obviously wants to learn from God which, as Solomon has made clear, is the starting point to become wise.(v.2,3) The only one who understands the earth is its Creator who Himself actually visited the earth. The writer quotes Psalm 68:18 which in turn is used by Paul in Eph.4:8 to refer to Jesus, who is both God and the Son of God.(v.4) Every word of God is tested to be pure,(Ps.12:6) and can shield us from the Devil's attacks.(Eph.6:16) It is in no way to be added to or altered.(Deut.4:2; Rev.22:18) Agur was clearly aware of the terrible consequence of messing with scripture.(v.5,6)

He was very conscious of Solomon's strong message about the rich and the poor because his prayer is to be neither. He realises how the rich are inclined to depend on themselves instead of God and how on the other hand the poor are tempted to steal.(v.7-9) He is aware too of how vulnerable the lowest worker is to abuse.(v.10) Agur is particularly disturbed by four kinds of people, the son who puts down his parents, the self-righteous who cannot see his own sin, the arrogant who thinks of himself as superior to the rest of humanity and the man who exploits and terrorises the poor.(v.11-14) He has noticed four forces which only take and demand more, like leeches - death, the barren womb, the thirsty desert and the forest fire. He compares the ungrateful son to all of them.(v.15-17) He is fascinated by four mysteries of the world, a flying eagle, a slithering snake, a sailing ship and a man courting a woman. He uses them to warn against the harlot who has no conscience.(v.18-20)

Agur regards four unlikely events as earth-shaking, when these highly improbable circumstances happen, the slave become king, the fool stops eating, the unloved woman finally finds the man of her dreams and the maid takes over from her mistress.(v.21-23) He is impressed by the success of four living creatures, the ant preparing food for winter, the shephanim (a mouse like animal) living securely in a cave, how organised locusts seem to be when they swarm and how the lizard can make himself at home in a palace.(v.24-28) He compares the arrogance of the king, confident in his army, to the fearless lion, the strutting rooster or the goat.(v.29-31) Finally he says if any of these examples hit home with you, stop being a fool before there are consequences like a bleeding nose.(v.32,32)

King Lemuel is another mystery figure. The last chapter of Proverbs is the good advice his mother gave him, presumably as a young man. As we have seen one of the ways Solomon presents the good woman, Wisdom, is as a concerned mother.(1:20) Her two warnings to young Lemuel are about women and wine, two dangers for the young which often go together. Instead she urges him as a good king to protect and care for the needy to whom no one else listens.(v.1-9) She wants him to find the very best wife whom he can trust who will bring him great benefit and joy.(v.10-12) She describes this wonderful woman as skilled in crafts, innovative, hard working, and wise in investing their money.(v.13-19) She will care for the poor alongside him, and for those who work for them.(v.20-22) She will cause her husband to be respected.(v.23) While she can make her own clothes her personal qualities are what people notice the most about her including the wise and kind words she speaks.(v.24-27) Her husband and children admire her hugely.(v.28,29) Her secret is not just outward beauty but her relation with the Lord which shows in all she does.(v.30,31)

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What impressed you particularly in chapters 28 and 29 about Solomon's observations concerning the rich and the poor? How do they fit in with Jesus, James and Peter's teaching on the same theme?
2. What do the same chapters teach about good and bad leadership and how they affect those they lead? What choice decides which kind of leader we will be?
3. How will being wise or a fool affect family life?
4. How had Solomon's teaching impressed Agur? Think of present day illustrations of the same observations about life.(chapter 30)
5. What special warnings and encouragements did King Lemuel's mother give him about his future role? Should we really have such high expectations of the wife God will choose for us?(chapter 31)
6. Again choose a proverb you want to remember for the rest of your life, and memorise it.