

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

PART FOUR – CHAPTERS 10-12. – MORE WISDOM, BUT IS SOMETHING MISSING?

In Solomon's mind there were just two kinds of people, the wise and the fool. His wisdom had been God's special gift to him early in his reign as king. He had used God's wisdom well in his administration of his kingdom, and brilliantly in the book of Proverbs. He realised his responsibility to explain for all people the value of God's wisdom not only for daily living but also as the door into eternity. His father David had laid the ground in pointing out that foolishness was not intellectual but spiritual and that in the end wisdom or foolishness was the simple choice between believing God or denying Him.(Ps.53:1) Paul confirmed the same principle in the New Testament.(I Cor.1:26-2:16) Christ is our wisdom and if we trust Him alone we have His mind.

The most expensive perfume is definitely not the same after a fly has drowned in it. If we tolerate even one aspect of wrong teaching it can so easily take over and ruin our whole understanding of Truth. Jesus gave the same warning about leaven taking over the whole lump of dough.(Matt.13:33; 16:6-12) Our path in life quickly demonstrates to everyone around us whether we are drawing on God's wisdom or not.(10:1-3) A striking example of wisdom in action is how we handle unreasonable anger from those in authority. Solomon would have seen plenty of examples of this during his years in government. So often it must have seemed to him to be perverse that fools were in charge and wise people meekly served.(10:4-7) Ordinary everyday life provides endless practical examples of the damage done by being foolish and in contrast the protection of wisdom. Fools have a great deal to say which helps no-one. The wise have a few well chosen gracious words.(10:8-15) Again Solomon illustrates from experience in government the difference between foolish rulers who are lazy drunks who think money will fix everything and wise leaders who lead well. Even before the days of video surveillance Solomon was aware of the trouble that a fool's loose mouth could get him into.(10:16-20)

There is an uncertainty about life because only God knows what the weather will be tomorrow, the mysteries of creation and the way events will work out. It therefore makes sense to spread the bread on the water as bait for the fish or to diversify our risks in investment. Even better is the investment we can make in the life of another person who needs the wisdom of God.(II Tim.2:2) Sitting doing nothing is not a sensible option in the face of the unknown.(11:1-6) It is good to make sense of every day of our lives having no idea how many more we will have. Still Solomon has no idea what happens when we die. Is it the end? He encourages the young to live each day to the full but he warns them, if life is just about pleasing ourselves, of God's judgement to come. The greatest priority for the young is to discover the secret of joy and peace in the heart as the best preparation for the future.(11:7-10)

Solomon's final chapter focuses again on youth and the need to have a strong faith based on knowing God as the Creator before the important life choices which are to come. Sadly he has a pessimistic view of the later part of life. He could be foreshadowing the end of

history,(Acts 2:19-21) but it seems at the same time he is anticipating his own joyless future when life has become pointless, fearful and unproductive. He is dreading his own death when like the grasshopper his energy runs out, or like the caperberry, a spice, he no longer adds a rich flavour to his society. He anticipates his spirit returning to God but is there anything more to come? Yet again if youth is all there is to life it all seems futile.(12:1-8) Solomon had learned that it is not enough just to be wise if we do not pass it on in a structured, understandable way in both preaching and writing. He was aware of the importance of using words skilfully, like tools in the hands of a master craftsman,(II Tim.2:14) or a good farmer. To be of real value every word must come from God, the Chief Shepherd.(I Pet.5:4) But beware of endless words and books written for the sake of writing. Study for its own sake can be a subtle sidetrack. Truth needs to be worked out in life.(12:9-12) Solomon's final plea to everyone is to keep God and His word forever central in our lives. God will judge all of us. But tragically he did not follow his own advice.(12:13,14)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR FURTHER STUDY

1. What according to Solomon are the characteristics of the wise and the characteristics of the fool? How according to the New Testament can we recognise the difference?(Matt.7:24-27; 25:1-13) What practical situations does he describe which make it so obvious where we stand?(chap. 10)
2. What do not even the wisest men know while they are on earth?(Matt.24:36; I Cor.13:12) Because so much is unknown to us how does Solomon urge us to approach each new day? What special advice does he give to the young?(chap. 11)
3. Again what does Solomon urge on the young? What view does he have of old age? What good news would you have for Solomon having read the New Testament? What is the responsibility of the preacher?(II Tim.4:2-5) How can his ministry be effective? Of what danger does Solomon warn preachers? What might he have thought of the internet?(chapter 12)

CONCLUSION

In preparing this study I have found Ecclesiastes intensely puzzling. There is much wisdom here for daily life as there is in the book of Proverbs but Solomon's key question about the seeming vanity of our existence remains largely unanswered. What is missing in Solomon's writing is any sense of eternal life, the life of Christ which for the Christian is in us now, but will go on beyond death in a far richer way in heaven. We know Solomon's story of the blessing of God's wisdom given to him as a young man, effectively used for some years but eventually thrown away in the later part of his life as he indulged his weakness for women who in turn led him away from God into idolatry. Why is this book in scripture? My suggestion is that it is included for the same reason as many of Solomon's father David's Psalms. David at times had feelings of anger and doubt but he did the right thing with them by telling God. The answers came often in another Psalm but eventually in the New Testament. Solomon did the right thing with his questions. He asked God. We can do the same and then guided by the Holy Spirit search the rest of the Bible for answers. We do not know whether Solomon ever listened to the answers but we can. We will find abundant help!