

PROVERBS – THE BOOK OF WISDOM

A proverb is a saying that sums up a life experience in a pithy and memorable way. We use them all the time, and it is surprising how many people quote Bible proverbs without realizing where they come from – “pride comes before a fall”, “a friend in need is a friend indeed”, and “you reap what you sow”, for example. It is only when you try to compose a proverb yourself that you realize how much wit and observation of human nature goes into these sayings. King **Solomon**, as we saw in the book of Kings, was gifted with extraordinary wisdom. Most of the Book of Proverbs can be attributed to him. He must have had secretaries who wrote down his observations as they rolled off his lips; later they came to be compiled into the collection we have in our Bible.

The Book of Proverbs begins with an extended allegory, occupying nine chapters, that is based on two symbolic women. One is **Wisdom**, who stands in the street and calls to passers-by to appreciate that we only have one existence, warning them not to waste time on empty attractions that quickly pall and fade, but to serve God, who can truly reward us. In contrast there is **Folly**. She is portrayed as an alluring adulteress, who invites young men to turn aside into her chambers to enjoy brief and illicit pleasures, that end in death. We are meant to see the contrast between serving God, or pursuing the way of the world, obsessed with money and pleasure. It anticipates Jesus’ brilliant parable of the two roads – the narrow, exhausting one that leads to eternal life, and the broad, easy way that goes down to destruction.

From chapter ten onwards, we are treated to a glorious miscellany of often amusing but powerful rules and warnings that cover all aspects of life. They are just as true today as they were in the time of Solomon - indeed some of them are bang up to date. Take the repeated warnings about neglecting the discipline of children, for example. We see the fruits of “*spare the rod and spoil the son*” in our society, with teenage gangs terrorising our big cities. The hurt that comes from telling tales behind the back, the wisdom of consulting a range of advisors before taking action, the danger that pride leads us into hasty actions we later regret – all these and more are waiting for your attention in this amazing book. And time and again Solomon returns to the point that if we base our lives on God’s commands, we will find happiness now, and future blessing. “*In all your ways acknowledge him*”, he insists, “*and he will make straight your paths*”.

ECCLESIASTES – THE EMPTINESS OF LIFE WITHOUT GOD

The curious English title of this short book is taken from the name given to it in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the **Septuagint**). “Ecclesiastes” comes from the same root as the New Testament word for “church” – a collection of people whose names are called out. The Hebrew title literally means a “gathering”. Perhaps the idea is we should come together to listen to the words of **the Preacher**, who introduces himself in the first verse. He says he is the son of David and King of Jerusalem, which unerringly links him with Solomon.

Ecclesiastes is the distilled experience of a man who had access to all that this world can offer. Solomon was incredibly rich, and able to indulge himself with lavish entertainments, great building projects, a huge harem, and sweet music. He tried them all, he says in chapter two. And yet he found no lasting satisfaction in his achievements

*“... whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no **pleasure**, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”*
Ecclesiastes 2:10, 11

The book pinpoints a fundamental truth about human endeavour. Whatever we have, we want more. We work overtime for months to save up for a new car or a great holiday, and when we have bought it, we find there is a more powerful model available or a more fashionable resort

to fly to, and we are off again, striving for the latest or the biggest or the one that we see our neighbours are able to afford.

Happiness is elusive. It does not come from possessions or climbing up the social ladder. In fact, the poor man may be happier than the rich.

“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity Sweet is the sleep of a labourer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.” Ecclesiastes 5:10, 12

And Solomon comments wryly that life is unpredictable. *“Time and chance happen to them all”*, he perceives. Often the millionaire dies young, and has to leave his wealth to others, who quickly squander it. Before we realize it, we are old, and life has slipped through our fingers. His last chapter concludes with a graphic portrayal of the weakness of old age, and the inevitability of death. *“Man is going to his eternal home”*, he observes, *“and the mourners go about the streets”* Ecclesiastes 12:5.

It all sounds very gloomy. And truly, life is empty, apart from God. Solomon emphasises the word *“vanity”* (emptiness) as the sum of human activity. Whatever we do *“under the sun”* ends in the grave. We need to lift up our eyes above the sun to the throne of God, and see that this life is intended as a testing ground, a preparation for a life to come where we can live in His presence. Here is Solomon’s last word on the subject -

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14