

TRANSFORMATION: THE WISDOM LITERATURE

STUDY 7: PERSPECTIVES ON POVERTY

The Context of Wisdom

In the Old Testament there are five sections: 1) the Pentateuch, 2) the History books, 3) Wisdom Literature, 4) the Prophets, 5) the Apocalyptic Writers. This study covers the third of these five sections. Included in the study are: a) Job, b) Psalms, c) Proverbs, d) Ecclesiastes, and e) Song of Solomon. These five books form the middle section of modern Bibles and the main authors of this literature are Job, David and Solomon.

The Contribution of Wisdom

The wisdom literature contrasts with the law and the prophets, history, and eschatology. Law defines what is right and wrong and attaches penalties to illegal actions. The prophets combined the call to spiritual renewal with the demand for social justice. History describes what has been while eschatology dreams of what might be. Wisdom looks at life and interprets it according to what works and what lasts. In the opening chapters of Proverbs the twin aims of wisdom are noted as knowledge of God and justice in society. This means of achieving wisdom are discipline and sharing (Pr. 1:2-3, 7 ; 2:9, 6:23, 3:27-28, 8:20, 9:10). In contrast the foolish person is greedy, selfish, and does not seek God. Wisdom therefore has both a religious and an ethical dimension. It is this latter aspect which this study highlights. It is common to read the book of Job to study the meaning of suffering and the Psalms for devotional reflection and inspiration but both also emphasize the ethical requirements of a just God.

Job – The Rich Man Who Became Poor

In the opening two chapters of this book, Satan is allowed to control Job's circumstances and reduces him from the richest man in the East to the poorest. Job responds with some remarkable statements of faith: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (1:23). In response to his wife's advice to, "curse God and die," he says: "Shall we accept good from God and not trouble? (2:10).

The second level on which Job's life is judged is his behavior. His comforters begin by recognizing that he has not lived for himself alone: "Think how you have strengthened feeble hands. Your words have supported those who stumble; you have strengthened feeble knees" (4:3). Later they accuse him of the opposite actions (22:6-10) but Job maintains that he will pass the behavior test just as he passed the belief test (23:10). It is those who do not trust in God who exploit the poor (4:24). Job's final appeal before God and man is made in chapter 31. As he summed up his life and defended his actions, Job made three personal and ten social statements.

Personal

1. I have been correct in my believe – v. 5
2. I have been upright in my behavior – v. 9
3. I have no hidden sins to confess – v. 33

Social

1. I have treated my servants justly – v. 13
2. I have been generous to the poor – v. 16
3. I have cared for the orphans – v. 17
4. I have clothed the naked – v. 19
5. I have not exploited the weak – v. 21
6. I have not boasted about my wealth – v. 24, 26
7. I have not rejoiced at my enemies' misfortune – v. 29
8. I have fed both servants and strangers – v. 31-32
9. I have cared for my land – v. 38
10. I have rewarded my tenant farmers – v. 39

Read this chapter and note the points Job makes. See also chapter 29:12-17. What conclusions can be drawn from the evidence Job presents?

When God passes judgment on people will it be mostly according to a) what they believed? b) what they have done? c) equally to what they have believed and done? Is the basis of judgment the same for rich and poor or are there differences?

David – The Poor Man Who Became Rich

When David was a teenager and the youngest in his family he was not always invited to important family events, but left tending the sheep. This was certainly the situation Samuel found when he went to anoint one of Jesse's sons as Israel's second king. Yet David was chosen by God and from lowly beginnings became the most powerful man in the land.

He became strong:

- a) Spiritually ("From the day of his anointing on, the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power." 1 Sam 16:13)
- b) Militarily ("David triumphed over Goliath with a stone and a sling." 1 Sam. 17:50), (They sang: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.' 1 Sam. 29:5)
- c) Politically ("David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker." 2 Sam 3:1), ("Everything David did pleased the people." 2 Sam. 3:36)
- d) Economically ("Now Hiram King of Tyre sent messengers to David along with logs and carpenters and stonemasons, and they built a palace for David." 2 Sam. 5:11)
- e) Socially ("I will make your name great like the names of the greatest men on the earth." 2 Sam 7:9).

David's kingship is summed up in the words, "David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people" (2 Sam. 8:15). When David writes his thoughts and prayers he focuses on the dual themes of worship and justice. Both are linked. The theme of justice in the Psalms is briefly examined here. Fill in the blank spaces.

a) God is just.

7:11 "God is a righteous judge."

9:16 "The Lord is known by His justice."

11:7 "The Lord is righteous, He loves justice."

33:5 "The Lord loves righteousness and justice."

45:6 "Your throne, O God will last forever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of

your kingdom."

67:4

69:33 "The Lord hears the needy."

89:14 "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne."

b) Justice is the best policy and pleases God

37:28 "The Lord loves the just."

41:1 "Blessed is he who has regard for the weak."

82:3

82:4

106:3 "Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right."

112:9 "Good will come to him who conducts his affairs with justice."

119:121 "I have done what is righteous and just."

c) God acts to bring justice in human society

10:17 "You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them and listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed."

35:10 "Who is like you, O Lord? You rescue the poor from those who rob them."

37:6 "He will make your righteousness to shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun."

68:5

72:4 "He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy. He will crush the oppressor."

103:6 "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed."

113:7 "He raised the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap."

140:12

d) Human society is marred with injustice.

14:3 "All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt."

58:1 "There is none who does good, not even one."

58:2

94:5 "The proud crush your people, O Lord, they oppress your inheritance. They slay the widow and the alien, they murder the fatherless."

109:16 "The evil man hounded to death the poor and the needy and the broken hearted."

e) God will judge all in justice

9:8 "He will judge the world in righteousness. He will govern the peoples with justice."

96:13 "He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the people in his truth."

98:9

99:1 "The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble."

99:4 "The king is mighty; He loves justice – you have established equity; in Jacob you have done what is right and just."

102:7 "He will respond to the prayer of the destitute. HE will not despise their plea."

Read Psalm 15 and note the requirements for dwelling with God. Why do the Psalms link worship and justice? Quote a teaching of Jesus which makes the same link.

Studying the life of David reveals that he did do some unjust things. The most graphic

example is his killing of Uriah to cover up for his adultery with Bathsheba. The consequences were that the illegitimate child died and David was rebuked and reprimanded before the prophet Nathan and the Lord.

Solomon – The Rich Man Who Became Richer

In contrast to Job and David, Solomon never experienced poverty. He grew up in a palace, built a grander palace, and entertained kings, queens, and wise men from throughout the world (1 Kings 10:29-34). He became the richest man in the world (1 Kings 10). Among his possessions were 12,000 horses, 14,000 chariots, a fleet of ships, the most beautiful and expensive throne in the world and an annual income of approximately 1,000 talents of gold (about 20 metric tonnes).

When at the beginning of his reign God appeared to Solomon and offered him anything he wanted, Solomon asked for wisdom to be able to govern effectively and justly (1 Kings 3:7-12). The first evidence of this ability was in the judgment about which of two prostitutes was the mother of the live child. It was also shown in the 3,000 proverbs, the 1,005 songs, and the botanical studies and zoological lectures attributed to him (3:26-34). Solomon's other wise actions included building a temple for God before building a temple for himself, bringing peace and prosperity to the country, and improving working conditions for his laborers by giving them two months at home after every month at work in the city away from their families (1 Kings 5:14)

Solomon showed that wisdom is a gift – it was given to him by God; an ability – he used and developed his gift; a service – he used his wisdom to help others; and a heritage – he recorded his insights. Solomon's wisdom is recorded in Proverbs. His thoughts on poverty and justice include the following verses. Fill in the verses below. Mark them with a star (*) if they suggest that the poor are responsibly for their own poverty and a cross (x) if others are considered responsible.

2:6-8 "The Lord gives wisdom...victory to the upright...shields the blameless – guides the just...protects the faithful."

6:16-19 "There are six things that the Lord hates – haughty eyes, a lying tongue, a hand that sheds innocent blood, a wicked heart, false witnesses, quarrelers"

8:20 "I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice."

10:4 "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth."

11:1

11:24 "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper."

11:25

12:5 "The plans of the righteous are just."

13:11 "Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow."

13:23 "A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away."

14:20

14:23 "All hard work brings profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty."

16:8 "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice."

16:11 "Honest scales and balances are from the Lord."

16:19 "Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud."

17:23

18:5 "It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice."

18:9 "He who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys."

19:1 "Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a fool whose lips are perverse."

19:17

20:10

20:13 "Do not love sleep or you will grow poor."

20:17 "Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel."

20:23

21:3 "To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."

21:5

21:13

21:15 "When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers."

21:17 "He who loves pleasure will become poor, whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich."

21:21

21:26 "The righteous give without sparing."

22:2

22:7 "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender."

22:9 "A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."

22:16

22:22-23 "Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up their case and plunder those who plunder them."

24:28 "Do not testify against your neighbor without cause."

25:21 "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink."

28:5 "Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it fully."

28:6 "Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse."

28:8

28:19 "He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty."

28:23

29:2 "When the righteous thrive the people rejoice; when the wicked rule the people groan."

29:4 "By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down."

29:7

29:14 "If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure."

30:8 "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread."

30:9 "Otherwise I may have too much and disown you and say 'Who is the Lord?' or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of God."

30:14 "There are those who devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind."

31:5 "Kings must not deprive all the oppressed of their rights."

31:8

31:9 "Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Here are two comments on Proverbs. Choose a partner, then each person should pick one of the two comments and explain what it means and how it applies today to your partner.

It is said that Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon when he was young, Ecclesiastes when he was old, and Proverbs in his middle age. It seems that Proverbs is the in-between book, between earth and heaven, and an attempt to say how to live an earthly life without ignoring heavenly values. Of course, Solomon, to whom are attributed many of the sayings in Proverbs, was a very rich king. Can a rich man ever be sensitive to God's partiality to the poor? A greater than Solomon is necessary for that (Together, April 1984, p. 33)

The second comment:

The context of the Proverbs is the overarching mandate to do that which is wise, prudent, and skilful. It is also to pursue that which is right and fair and just. Thus in Proverbs we find legitimacy for the so-called "middle-class" values of hard work, thrift, and honesty (which could translate into a community development project, for example, to promote village self-sufficiency). Here too in Proverbs is strongly worded theological legitimacy for promoting social justice (which may mean taking some actions against oppressors). By some Christian activists, these strategies have been regarded as antithetical to each other. In fact, they are the complimentary halves of a pincer movement, which has as its goal the ensuring of enough for all. (Together, April 1984, p. 33)

As a group, brainstorm and write down as many contemporary proverbs as possible which say something about poverty in contemporary society.

The Wisdom of Asia

Undoubtedly the most influential figure in the history of the Indian sub-continent this century was Mahatma Gandhi. Francis Winters in Politics and Ethics describes Gandhi's approach.

Each generation has its own Socrates, however, and our own Socrates was Gandhi. With an essentially identical approach to truth. The Mahatma articulated an approach to politics which consisted in staging confrontations which would require the opponent to face the truth in himself. From such dialogue or confrontations would emerge truth from the situation. Although Gandhi is best known for his political achievements and almost equally identified with a philosophy of non-violence, it is important to realize that for Gandhi himself the basic issue was truth. What actions of his own or his followers would reveal the truth of the situation? The answer was always: those actions which would engage the adversary in continuing confrontation without destroying him. For this reason, Gandhi felt required to advocate non-violence, since destroying an opponent, who possessed his own segment of the truth, would preclude the possibility of discovering that truth. At the heart of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) is the search for truth through dialogue (1975, p. 37)

Meditation

This study concludes with a meditation on the most famous chapter of the Old Testament.

Each student should attempt to translate it into his own language or to write a similar reflection on a verse or passage of scripture.

The Development Worker's Psalm

A Paraphrase and Reflection on Psalm 23

The Lord is my example, and my animator, I shall not fail.

He leads me into the conflict zone where injustice and oppression, ignorance and fear dominate the lives of the world's poor. He gives me courage to challenge the oppressors and strength to attempt the seemingly impossible task of eradicating both the causes and effects of poverty.

With His spirit as my strength I can shrug off the threat of violence against me, and immerse myself in the people's struggle against evil and death in its myriad forms. I know that together we can win our rights, develop our skills, enhance our environment, and build our community.

Constant criticisms will not deter me, for the champion of the poor has called me to care for His suffering children. I will challenge the comfortable to share their resources and counsel the poor to put their faith and hope in God, whose constant, self-giving love reaches into their mud and thatch huts or sidewalk shelters.

Now they may struggle to survive one day at a time, but in God's kingdom they will reign forever. Now they may be the victims of a thousand injustices, but then they will be treated as precious sons and daughters of the sovereign creator of life. Now they may be imprisoned in the slums of the city, or in the impoverished rural village where the low caste have no voice and no power. Then they will be free, and never again will they be treated as worthless and useless. They will take their place alongside the famous and the rich, alongside the educated and the strong, for through faith they are equally citizens of heaven.

So amidst the pain and the paradox of a hurting world, I seek to share the truth, and the love, and the presence of God, so that those who are poor might catch a vision of God's purpose for their lives and experience in this life, the glory and reality of the world to come. (Bellingham, 1985)