

## Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Notes for June 10-24

**June 10: Ecclesiasticus 18.1-19.3: Host Toyin, Lead Brian:** God's compassion for mankind's weakness – Generosity – Need for foresight – Maxims of prudence and self-discipline – Giving way to passion and luxury. Whether or not you believe in a conscious after-life for us, the concept of God as always has been and always will be does challenge our imaginations. We struggle with billions of years, let alone eternity! I always admired JW friends who could happily contemplate a picture of heaven which was basically ordinary life, without all the drawbacks, going on for ever. We have all had good experiences which we would have been happy to enjoy for a bit longer; but "for ever".....? We know more about many things than the writer knew. In some ways, that just makes the mystery bigger. For no particular reason, I am thinking of Sophie territory: of the novice musician who has just picked out a first tune on the piano, and then settles down to listen to the Ring Cycle.

In a religious perspective, God is in charge but not in control. In other words, if you try to argue that everything happens because God wills it, you do find yourself thinking that God has a lot of explaining to do..... and the concepts of sin and repentance become meaningless. ("I'm sorry, God, that you made me sin; and I'm glad, God, that you made me repent of the sin you made me do"!)

The contrast offered here between mankind and God is even greater than the contrast between the Mayfly (one day) and the human life span up to 100 years+ Incidentally, it is interesting to see a 100 year life span being mooted 2,000 years ago.

The writer proclaims God's compassionate love for all human beings, and then lapses into portraying God as liking only the good people. Maybe the writer is struggling to get away from human selectivity: I only like likeable people! To his credit, the writer does not lapse into pessimism and doubt – as he might well have done in looking at a world where the one certainty for good and bad people was death, and goodness and badness didn't always visibly get their "deserts" in this life.

There is a mixed motives issue with Ecclesiasticus: pleasing God, and doing yourself a bit of good. But' if you avoid doing harm, I'm not sure that doing good with your own interests in mind is wicked? I rather like the tail end advice to good in the right way – e.g. giving with a friendly smile rather than grudgingly or self-righteously. Verse 19: "Before you speak, learn" is really sound advice.

Foresight is great, if you can get it! (As all politicians would acknowledge.) Self-control is another must have: nothing worse than the adult behaving like an infant.

**June 17: Ecclesiasticus 19: 4-30: Host Toyin, Lead Evan.** Handling malicious gossip. Good and bad cleverness. A lot of common sense here. At the time of the writer, it was a matter

of things being said, repeated, and remembered; or left unsaid. In the “social media” age, the throw-away line can reach millions and stick around for ever; and untruths can gain credence from repeated from mass repetition. The advice on taking up a rumour with the person rumoured against is interesting and challenging. In our day, good media can do a good job in confronting someone with allegations and providing the opportunity to respond. A sensitive and tricky area; and I’m not sure I would want to be the first to say to a friend or acquaintance “You know what they are saying about you...”

I love the discussion about cleverness and wisdom (and modesty and discretion).

Not sure I agree with verses 29 and 30?

**24 June: Ecclesiasticus 20: 1-34: Host Andy, Lead David:** Discipline in speech. Selection of paradoxes. Untimely speech. Diffidence and lies. Appropriate use of wisdom. We probably all have our own self-imposed rules about speaking and keeping quiet. Professionals such as Toyin get training as well as experience to help them get it right. In some ways, the rules conflict. Yes, good to get it off your chest; but choose your time and opportunity, and think about how it is going to sound. Sometimes, best not to say it? One of the challenges is that you know it is the right time for you; but you don’t know about the other person’s timing. For example, it is time to say to someone that a particular volunteering job they are doing is really not going well. You don’t know that they were sacked from their paid job that morning. Or, you want someone to take on a task, and don’t know that they are struggling with their existing commitments. Or the casual, “funny looking necklace” – the mother who had owned it has just died. Too much caution: silence. Too little caution: un-necessary pain.

The paradoxes are a healthy reminder that most generalisations are sometimes wrong.

Cosying up to the influential is a dubious rule for life – though upsetting them un-necessarily really doesn’t make sense either. Motivation is an issue; but, as suggested above, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is probably better than doing the wrong thing for the right reasons?