

Preface To The Books Of Solomon (1545 and 1534)

Three books bear the name of Solomon. The first is Proverbia, “Proverbs,” which may rightly be called a book of good works, for in it he teaches us how to lead a good life before God and the world.

He pays especial attention to the young people and instructs them, in fatherly fashion, according to God’s commandments, with comforting promises of how well it shall go with the good, and with threats of how the wicked will have to be punished. For young people are of themselves inclined to all evil and, besides, because of their inexperience, they do not understand the wiles and wickedness of the world and the devil, and are far too weak to withstand bad examples and causes of offense, and are not able to govern themselves, but if they are not trained they are ruined and lost before they get their bearings.

Therefore they need and must have teachers and rulers, to exhort, warn, rebuke, and chastise them, to hold them constantly to the fear of God and to His commandments, and to keep off the devil, the world, and the flesh. This, then, is what Solomon does diligently and richly, in this book, putting his doctrine into proverbs, so that it can be grasped the more easily and kept the more gladly. Any man who intends to become righteous might well take this book as a hand-book, or prayer-book, for daily use, and read it often, and see his own life in it.

For a man must go one of two ways — he must either let his father chastise him or let the executioner punish him; as they say, “You may escape me, but not the hangman”; and it would be good to impress this constantly on the young people, so that they might know without doubt that they must suffer either the father’s rod, or the executioner’s sword, just as Solomon, in this book, is constantly threatening the disobedient with death. There is no way out of it; God leaves nothing unpunished. We see in our own experience that disobedient knaves perish in strange ways, and finally get into the headman’s hands when they least expect it and feel most secure. Public witnesses and signs of all this are the gallows, wheels, and places of execution at the gates of all the cities. God, through the temporal government, has put them there to terrify all those who will not let themselves be trained by God’s Word into obedience to their elders.

Therefore in this book Solomon calls all those who despise God’s Word “fools,” and all those who keep God’s commandments “wise.” This does not hit the young people only, though his chief purpose is to teach them, but people of all stations, from the highest to the lowest. For just as youth has its own vices, against God’s commandments, so every other station has its own vices, and they are worse than the vices of youth. So the proverb says, “The older, the worse”; and again, “Age helps no folly.”

Even if there were nothing evil in the higher stations, no such vices as greed, pride, hatred, envy, etc., nevertheless this one vice would be bad enough, namely, that they want to be shrewd and wise

when they ought not to be, and everybody is inclined to do something else than what is committed to him, and to leave undone that which is committed to him. For example, a man in the spiritual office wants to be wise and active in worldly things, and there is no end to his knowledge of them; on the other hand, a man in worldly office has a head too small to hold all his superfluous knowledge about the conduct of the spiritual office.

Of such fools all lands, all cities, all houses are full, and in this book they are diligently rebuked, and everyone is exhorted to mind his own business and to do faithfully and diligently the duty that is committed to him. Such people are called wise men; the disobedient are called fools, though they do not want to be, or be called, either disobedient men or fools.

The second book is called Koheleth; we call it "The Preacher." It is a book of comfort. When a man would live an obedient life, according to the teaching of the first book, and attend to his duty or office, then the devil, the world, and his own flesh block the way against him, so that he becomes weary and disgusted with his duty, and is sorry for everything that he has begun; for things will not go as he wants them to. Then arise worry, labor, disgust, impatience, and murmuring, and a man is ready to let go hand and foot, and do nothing more. For if the devil cannot prevent obedience on the right hand, by means of curiosity and desire, he will hinder it on the left hand with worry and vexation.

Now as Solomon, in the first book, teaches obedience in the face of mad lust and curiosity, so in this book he teaches that men are to be patient and steadfast in obedience, in the face of unpleasantness and temptation, and are constantly to do the duty of the hour with peace and joy. What they cannot keep or alter, they are to let go; they will be well off.

The third book is a song of praise, in which Solomon praises God for obedience, as for a gift of God. For where God is not the householder and ruler, there is neither obedience nor peace in any station of life; but where there is obedience and good rule, there God dwells, and kisses and embraces His dear bride with His Word, which is the kiss of His lips. Therefore, when things, in the land or the home, go, so far as possible, according to the first two books; then one may well sing this third book, and thank God, who has not only taught us this, but has Himself done it. Amen.