

SESSION #22

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOKS OF POETRY & WISDOM

We have looked at the books of the Law and most of the historical books. This brings us now to the next category of OT books: the 5 books of poetry and wisdom. Before we plunge into these, let's get a little introduction to this category.

To put everything into context, have a look at this partial biblical bookshelf of the OT. First of all, note the historical books on the main shelf, the Books of Moses, then Joshua, Judges, Ruth and the books of Samuel and the Kings. At the end of the bookshelf you'll see Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. We are jumping over these in terms of the order in which they appear in our Bibles because the stories of these 3 books take place near the end of the OT period. So they might be more understandable if we treat them within the chronological time-frame.

"Poetry" primarily refers to the book of Psalms but also to the book of Job. "Wisdom" refers to Solomon's writings, the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon.

The events of the book of Job take place early in the Genesis stories, so you'll see an arrow there going back into history. Just because it's in the middle of the OT doesn't mean that it was written about that time. It is a very early book indeed, perhaps one of the oldest books in the world.

The book of Psalms was mostly written during 1 & 2 Samuel.

Then the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, written by Solomon and therefore within the time period of 1 Kings. With that in mind, let's take a look then at some of the content of these books.

The historical books on that main shelf dealt with the Hebrew nation, whereas the books of poetry and wisdom deal with the human heart. There isn't just a narrow focus on one nation, but all of humanity in view. These books talk to the human heart, the human condition, and especially some of our emotions as human beings. So these books,

particularly the Psalms, have of course become worldwide favorites for thousands of years because of that characteristic: they speak cross-generational, cross-culturally, across time zones to people wherever we live and move.

There are three literary types in the books of poetry and wisdom. There is lyric poetry, which especially characterizes the book of Psalms. That is a kind of poetry which was originally meant to be sung to and so there are many songs in the book of Psalms making it a singing kind of book. So that's a type of poetry, lyrical, originally accompanied by music and still in our day accompanied by music. But that's not the only kind of poetry found in these Bible books.

There are two others. One is a didactic type, a teaching mode. And you see this kind of poetry in the book of Proverbs, which is not a singing book at all; it's a teaching type of book. And so is Ecclesiastes. In fact, Ecclesiastes is subtitled "the preacher" so it's more like a sermon, a teaching style of poetry.

There's a third style of poetry in the Bible and that is dramatic. This is true especially of the book of Job and the Song of Solomon. Both of these books are not books to be sung to, and they're not primarily teaching books. They contain action within dialogue. There is some action but it's mostly action that takes place in dialogue, a dramatic type of poetry.

The idea of poetry may suggest flowing fonts, light and airy and beautiful words or moods. These books are like that in terms of their form but it doesn't mean that they don't have some tremendously powerful realities. All of these poetical and wisdom books deal with huge realities. Oh they may be, in some cases, poetry in the style in which that truth is conveyed but the actual truths being communicated are tremendously big. So, collectively they are not just poetical books; collectively they are the books of wisdom, which conveys a much heavier, deeper feel.

J. Sidlow Baxter has suggested a concept of spiritual progress which we see in these 5 books. The first book, the book of Job, puts us at the bottom of the spiritual progression. Here is where the death of the self-life has to take place in order to begin any spiritual progress. Our spiritual progress. One of the cries that comes out of Job's heart in the

midst of his difficult experiences is this: *“Oh that there were someone who could stand between me and God and mediate on my behalf!”* (Job 9:33) He had a controversy with God and he wanted a lawyer as it were, a mediator, to stand between him and God, and bring the two warring parties together. A great cry, and a great desire for a mediator.

That is where spiritual progress begins. For us, too, a first spiritual step arises out of a similar cry of helpless desperation. We want someone who can bring us to God; somebody who can connect us with God. That’s the cry of Job.

Then as you move upward in spiritual progress, you come into the book of Psalms which often expresses a new life in God. And the psalmists so often talk about communion with God as a personal relationship with a personal God. It’s a meaningful thing for the psalm writers and they express so eloquently that kind of relationship, communion. And that’s where spiritual progress goes next: a communion with Jesus Christ, the One who mediates between God and us.

And then the third stage is seen in the book of Proverbs which speaks of practical discipling of the soul in the school of God. So finding wisdom now in Jesus Christ, a wisdom that translates into practical actions, practical behavior, practical words.

Then a fourth stage, Ecclesiastes: the weaning of the heart away from the world in which we live. That is, the world’s desires, all that would anchor us and pull us downward, needs to be released and cut loose, so that we can recognize how important it is that we focus not downward, but we focus upward. And Ecclesiastes helps us to do that by showing us the dark side of the coin, the downward pull that is so strong, and a desire for ultimate satisfaction which Solomon expresses in that book.

Finally, the Song of Solomon – a picture of union in love with Jesus Christ, the Bride and Bridegroom as we’ll see when we get to this book. That is where the spiritual progress moves toward as an ultimate goal. And that’s where we’re ultimately heading.

If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, He is your Bridegroom, you are part of His Bride. And some day that’s what we’re looking forward to: a marriage ceremony when we will see Him as He is. He will take us to the Father’s house. There will be a union with Him that will never be broken. We will be with Him forever and ever.

This movement through these five books will ring true. However, realize that we cannot move in that direction unless we start where the Bible starts. And the Bible starts with Job, and this progression begins there too. We can't have the kind of oneness and communion with Jesus Christ as the Song of Songs demonstrates unless first of all we begin with the experience of Job, the death of the self-life, and something of the lessons which he teaches us through his own life story.

So, be sure to join me for our next session together when we get into Job's dramatic story.
