

“Survey of the Scriptures”

Session #5 – BOOKS OF POETRY

To know and understand the Bible we need to know something of the people of the Book. And where can we learn more about any people than from their poets? The hopes and longings, the joys, sorrows and aspirations of the Hebrews were expressed in their poems and songs.

The inspired poetry of the Bible is God-centered. The deepest emotions of the Hebrew poets were expressed in thoughts of God. They praised His attributes and exalted His name, never forgetting man’s frailty and sinful nature. Many of the Psalms are still used as hymns and anthems in our churches, just as they have been used in temples and synagogues of the Jews.

*“God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.”*

In our poetry we recognize rhyme and the meter or rhythm which repeats in a definite pattern, depending on the type of verse. Hebrew poetry has little rhyme or rhythm as we know it; instead, a repetition of ideas called parallelism is used. The beauty of this style is that it may be translated into any language without losing its poetic form.

“The heaven’s declare the glory of God...and the firmament showeth His handiwork.” Here both lines express a similar idea. This is one form of parallelism frequently used in Bible poetry.

“Righteousness exalteth a nation...but sin is a reproach to any people.” Here is a form of parallelism in which the thought of the second line contrasts with the first. In this case righteousness and sin are contrasted.

“Who can number the clouds in wisdom? Or who can stay the bottles of heaven, when the dust groweth into hardness, and the clods cleave fast together?” When each new thought builds on the previous one we have what is called synthetic parallelism. The word “synthetic” here means putting together; in this case the poet puts together a structure of related thoughts.

Like all Scripture, the five poetical books were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

- Job, a poem of suffering;
- Psalms, poems of song;
- Proverbs, poems of wisdom;
- Ecclesiastes, a poem on life;

and Song of Solomon, a poem of love. There are many other poetic passages throughout the Bible as can readily be seen in newer versions in which they are set in poetic form.

The author of the book of **Job** is unknown, nor is there any certainty as to the date it was written although it is generally conceded to be very old. All we know about the personal life of Job is given in the prologue and epilogue, which are written in prose. He was a wealthy man, suddenly stripped of everything he owned, even his good health.

Why the righteous suffer has been one of man's great problems down through the ages. Job's long dramatic poem takes the form of a discussion between the suffering Job and his friends (or comforters) as they seek the answer. As literature the book of Job ranks among the world's finest, and in understanding of the physical universe far surpasses all the works of other poets.

In a three-cycle argument, Job's three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar sought to convince him that his suffering was the penalty for sin. Their condemnation grew with each round of discussion. Finally young Elihu joined in with his idea that Job's suffering was for discipline. Job was depressed and puzzled but his faith in God held firm.

"When He hath tried me I shall come forth as gold!" Job said. We should remember that in God's sight Job was a good and upright man. The sudden and intense suffering to which he was subjected was not because of his sins.

At last the voice of God came from the darkness and whirling wind, questioning Job as to his knowledge of nature and the universe. While God did not explain the reason for suffering, Job realized that in the limits of his humanity he could not understand the greatness of God's way. And Job was content in the knowledge that suffering would refine and purify his character.

When Job finally realized God's majesty, holiness and power he also recognized his own unworthiness and said he abhorred himself. In the epilogue we read that God richly blessed Job, giving him twice as much as before.

As the Hebrew title implied, the **Psalms** are a collection of songs or praises. Many are ascribed to David, but Solomon, Asaph and Moses are also among the authors. The Psalms were used in religious services from the time David appointed certain Levites as singers and musicians in God's house.

Through the years the Psalms have not only influenced public worship but have also proved to be a handbook of devotional life for the individual. In them, man learns how to speak to God in praise and prayer.

From the depths of gloom to the high transports of joy, in prayer and penitence, in praise and adoration, the words of the Psalms express the experiences of the child of God in every generation.

The Psalms do not lend themselves to survey, but one way in which they may be studied is to classify them according to content. There are Messianic Psalms, songs of praise, poems about nature, poems of prayer. Some tell the history of God's people and still others are for instruction.

The Psalms are closely linked with the New Testament in that they anticipate its spirit and teaching. In them we read of man's sinfulness and need of redemption; of Christ's passion and glory; of God's pardoning grace; of the gifts of the Spirit. Writers of the New Testament show their familiarity with this book of praise in that many of their Old Testament quotations are from the Psalms.

The Jews divide the book of Psalms into five sections, more or less corresponding to the five books of the Law. Bible scholars have found that these books of Psalms contain subject matter similar to the books of Moses:

- Book one – Creation and Man;
- two – Redemption;
- three – the Sanctuary;
- four – Earthly Pilgrimage of God's people, and
- five – the Word of God.

Each of the five sections of Psalms end with a doxology, and the final doxology is composed of the last five Psalms. These begin and end with the words "Praise the Lord" or "Hallelujah". This is the Hallelujah Chorus of the Bible. What a fitting climax to this book of praise!

The Book of **Proverbs** has often been called the young man's book of wisdom. The Psalms are for worship but Proverbs are for walk. The Psalms are full of prayer and praise; the Proverbs are full of practical precepts.

The opening chapters of the Book of Proverbs are Solomon's instructions to his son. In Proverbs we find experience and accumulated wisdom in concentrated form – the Bible's *counsel capsules*. Other wise men as well as Solomon contributed to this book of wise sayings.

Instructions were given for walking in the way of good men and keeping in the paths of righteousness. It is interesting to study the number of times "walk," "way" and "path" are mentioned. In fact the first nine chapters – sometimes referred to as sermons for sons – are filled with good advice for the highway of life.

Proverbs is a book of contrasts. The way of transgressors is contrasted with the way of the righteous, the wise with the foolish, the merry with the sad. Throughout chapters ten to fifteen this contrasting or antithetic form of poetry is used.

Wisdom is better than gold, and understanding rather to be chosen than silver, say the Proverbs, warning that riches make themselves wings and fly away as the eagle to

heaven. Chapters 16 through 24 of the book are filled with such practical words of advice.

Realizing that words fitly spoken are like apples of gold in pictures of silver, Hezekiah ordered his scribes to write down the sayings of the wise men. These proverbs are included in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew people, and today as part of our Bible they still inspire and instruct us in honesty, purity and industry.

The Book of Proverbs is so full of good advice that some Christians make a practice of reading a chapter every day. Rather than surveying it in its entirety, this is a book which should be read line upon line, precept upon precept, and applied to daily living.

The preacher – as the word “**ecclesiastes**” means – has given a message for all mankind in his poem on life. He tried everything the world had to offer – everything under the sun – and found that all was vanity and vexation of spirit. His book is written in poetry and prose.

Ecclesiastes is an old man’s disappointed retrospect on life. He had rich earthly possessions – wealth, rank, honor, fame and pleasure, only to find that self-gratification and worldliness could not satisfy the heart. He learned man’s great need of God, the truth Christ Himself expressed when He said, “*What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?*”

The closing chapter of Ecclesiastes is a beautiful poem describing old age. When death comes the golden bowl is broken, the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and man goes to his long home. The closing admonition of the book is: “*Fear God and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.*”

The **Song of Solomon** – called the Song of Songs – is a love poem in the language and imagery of the Orient. There are several ways in which the book may be interpreted. It may be taken literally as Solomon’s song extolling the strength, beauty and constancy of human love.

The Song of Songs is read in Jewish synagogues at the Passover. The ancient Hebrews regarded this book as particularly sacred in that it represented the love of God for His people. Their interpretation has been spiritual, accepting the poem as an allegory.

“*Behold thou art fair, my love...behold thou art fair!*” In the poem the Christian finds many expressions of love which may be spiritualized. We may accept Solomon’s song as typical. It is based on Solomon’s love for the Shulamite but at the same time it typifies the love of Christ for His church which is His bride.

As we summarize the books of poetry in the Bible we remember first Job, who demonstrated that suffering may not necessarily be a sign of God’s displeasure and discipline. In his suffering, Job was satisfied that the ways of God were beyond his comprehension and was ready to trust in Him as Redeemer and Lord.

The Bible's songs of praise have patterned public worship and given language to private devotions. Their words of penitence, worship, thanksgiving and hope have met the need of every God-seeking heart. In them Christ is revealed as Redeemer, Prophet, Priest and King.

Proverbs is the practical handbook for everyday Christian living; more, it is a manual of wisdom, and in its pages Christ is revealed as the True Wisdom dwelling with God throughout eternity. In Ecclesiastes an old man's voice of experience warns that all this earth has to offer is empty – vanity and vexation of spirit he calls it. Only in obeying God may the true purpose in life be found.

Even the language of the Song of Solomon is not too extravagant to express the beauties found in Christ – the Lily of the Valley, the Fairest Among Ten Thousand and Altogether Lovely. He is the Heavenly Bridegroom who has won the love of His people.

In these five books of poetry the Christian finds spiritual enrichment and practical help. In Job, God is the Mighty Creator; in Psalms, God is All-in-all; in Proverbs, God is the Christian's guide through life. Through Ecclesiastes the Christian learns that only God can satisfy his heart. In Solomon's Song he sees Christ as the Lover of his soul. Surely the Christian can join the Psalmist in the great doxologies – Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

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