

**Xenos Christian Fellowship**  
**Christian Ministry 2**  
**Week 3 – Old Testament Poetry and Wisdom**

Editors' note:

- *Italics (lower case or ALL CAPS) show what students should write in their student outline.*
- **Bold (including bold italics and bold ALL CAPS) shows what appears in the student outline.**
- Regular text is used for lecture notes; ALL CAPS are used for emphasis.

### **Old Testament Poetry and Wisdom**

This part of the Bible includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. These books are grouped together in our Old Testament and are part of the “writings”<sup>1</sup> in the Hebrew Bible. Here is a very rough summary of what each book addresses:

- **Job – making sense of undeserved suffering.**
- **Psalms – honest prayer and praise to God.**
- **Proverbs – the value of true wisdom based on the fear of God.**
- **Ecclesiastes – the possibility of finding meaning and significance during our short life on earth.**
- **Song of Songs – celebrating love between husband and wife.**

Despite containing diverse material, these books do share some **common features**:

- *They are all reflective.* For the most part, they don't advance the story of the Bible, but rather look back on what God has said and done and the implications of his words and actions for our lives. Sometimes God's nature, truth and actions in history are considered to answer difficult questions, other times they form the basis for wise living or praising him. Whatever the case, these books contain some of the most moving and powerful material in the Bible. It is an area we hope you don't neglect in your own reading!
- *They should be read as a whole.* A common error when reading the wisdom books is to read bits and pieces, and miss their overall message. They should to be read together and considered in light of each other. Reading about Job's suffering puts the optimistic wisdom of Proverbs in perspective. The hope found in Proverbs is a good balance for Ecclesiastes, which emphasizes the futility of living without regard for God. Keep this in mind as you do your daily Bible reading.

In this lecture, we will give you general advice and a framework for reading Psalms and Proverbs. We've also supplied a handout on Ecclesiastes and Job. Make it a goal over the

---

<sup>1</sup> Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

next year to become familiar with each of these books so you can read each one in light of the others.

- *They are all written in poetic form.* Other genres of the Bible contain poems (e.g. Exodus 15:1-18), but these books showcase the use of Hebrew poetry.

### **Key features of Hebrew poetry**

Hebrew poetry has neither rhyme nor meter which are both common in English poetry. These features were not seen in Jewish poetry until 7th Century A.D.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Hebrew poetry “rhymes ideas” through the use of parallelism. It also emphasizes ideas with repetition, and illustrates concepts through the use of imagery. Instructors: You may want to students to refer to the homework they completed for this class as you go through this section.

#### **1. Parallelism**

Parallelism is a term used to describe the comparison of identical, similar or related ideas. Two lines in a line of Hebrew poetry may say the same thing using different sets of words, or they may contrast each other, or build on one another. Understanding the parallel structure of Hebrew poetry will help you explore the depth of meaning in each verse.

There are three basic types of parallelism:

**a. Synonymous parallelism. The second or subsequent line repeats or reinforces the sense of the first line.**

**“For he satisfies the thirsty  
and he fills the hungry with good things.” – Psalm 107:9**

**“He turned rivers into a desert,  
flowing springs into thirsty ground .” – Psalm 107:33**

**b. Antithetical parallelism. The second or subsequent line contrasts the thought of the first.**

**“The upright see and rejoice,  
but all the wicked shut their mouths.” – Psalm 107:42**

**“A wise son brings joy to his father,  
but a foolish son grief to his mother.” – Proverbs 10:1**

**c. Synthetic parallelism: The second or subsequent line provides more information about or completes the thought in the first line.**

---

<sup>2</sup> Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1994), p. 485.

**“Others went out on the sea in ships,  
they were merchants on the mighty waters.” – Psalm 107:23**

**“Blessed is the man  
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked  
or stand in the way of sinners  
or sit in the seat of scoffers.” – Ps. 1:1**

Notice how each line advances the meaning of what is being said. The verbs “walk,” “stand” and “sit” show the gradual progression of the wicked man—he moves from a casual to a settled relationship with sin.<sup>3</sup>

**Implication for the reader:** We live in a sound-bite culture. Listeners demand communication that is quick and succinct. But *Parallelism* forces the reader to circle back to a concept again and again, which *encourages reflection and deepens meaning*. Learn to TAKE YOUR TIME when reading the Psalms. THINK about what you’re reading and what the author is trying to say.

**“Some people never learn anything because they understand everything too soon.” – Alexander Pope**

**Good questions to ask:** Pay attention to the structure of the poem. As you read, ask “How are these lines related to each other?” “Are they saying the same thing?” “Are they saying the opposite thing?” “What additional information is being communicated in this line about the one preceding it?”

## 2. Repetition

Another key feature of Hebrew poetry is REPETITION. Like modern songs, many Psalms have a “refrain” or repeated phrase that emphasizes key ideas. Did you notice the repeated phrases in Psalm 107? Here’s one:

**“Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.” – Psalm 107:8,15,21,31**

Even in the shortest Psalm, the author takes time to repeat himself:

**“Praise the LORD, all nations;  
Laud Him, all peoples!  
For His lovingkindness is great toward us,  
And the truth of the LORD is everlasting.  
Praise the LORD!” – Psalm 117**

**Implication for the reader:** Modern readers are often annoyed with repetition. They wonder, “Why is the author telling me something I already know?” But repetition is an important tool the psalmists use to help reiterate the main point of

---

<sup>3</sup> Tremper Longman, *Reading the Bible With Heart and Mind* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988) p. 133.

the Psalm. *Repetition helps readers identify key emphases that God is trying to communicate.*

### 3. Imagery

Imagery involves the use of word pictures that help explain or illustrate the point the author is trying to make.

***“As the deer pants for the water brooks,  
So my soul pants for Thee, O God.” – Psalm 42:1***

***“I will say to God my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’” – Psalm 42:9***

**Good questions to ask: “Who does this image describe?” “What does it say about the person or group being described?” “What does this image tell you about the way God relates to people?”**

Through the use of parallelism, repetition, and imagery, Hebrew poetry communicates spiritual truths in a memorable way that evokes an emotional response. Let’s **compare** two different accounts of Israel’s miraculous escape from Egypt through the Red Sea, one written in prose and the other in poetry:

#### **Exodus 14:26-31; Exodus 15:1-5**

Moses’ prose lacks the life and color found in his poem. His poem places powerful images side by side and stirs the emotions of the reader. It informs our intellect but also speaks to our heart.

Following God is more than an exchange of ideas or adherence to a set of practices. A variety of emotions are present in any healthy relationship. Through poetry, we enter into the heart of God and experience the emotional highs and lows of people who have tried to follow him in the past.

## **Psalms**

This is probably the most popular book in the Old Testament. The Psalms relate every aspect of the human experience to our relationship with God in emotional language that deeply resonates with readers.

### **What are the Psalms?**

- *A hymnal* – a book of songs.

**“Here we have one hundred fifty separate poems, constituting a book that functioned as the hymnbook of the Old Testament people of God.”<sup>4</sup>**

---

<sup>4</sup> Tremper Longman, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 130.

The Psalms were originally written to be sung, often in ceremonies associated with the temple. They are filled with musical terminology, including Hebrew terms for vocal music, musical accompaniment, references to the choir leader, and mention of various instruments. King David, the chief author of the Psalms, was a skilled poet (2 Samuel 1:19-27; 3:33-34; 23:2-51) and musician (1 Samuel 16:18,23; 2 Samuel 6:5; Amos 6:5). He also instituted the use of music at the temple (1 Chronicles 15:16-24; 16:7,31; 25:1; Ezra 3:10).

### **Why are they useful?**

**They show how us how to relate to God.**

**“Most of the Bible speaks to us. The Psalms speak for us.” – Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, 297-373 A.D.**

The psalms give us words that help us share our own experiences with God. In the Psalms, we see inspired authors grappling with their own emotions and talking with God about their disappointments, dreams, failures, etc. As we listen to their words, we find our own.

- **They encourage us to relate *honestly* with God.**

Nearly all the Psalms involve an honest interaction with God. Look at the range of emotions expressed in these verses:

**Reverence and respect: (Psalm 5:7) “But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence I will bow down toward your holy temple.”**

**Shame: (Psalm 44:15a) “My disgrace is before me all day long and my face is covered with shame....”**

**Anger: (Psalm 109:9-10) “May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow, May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from ruined homes.”**

**Sorrow: (Psalm 6:6) “I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.”**

**Doubt: (Psalm 73:3-5) “I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles....Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure; in vain I have washed my hands in innocence.”**

This short sampling only scratches the surface of the deep emotions found in the Psalms.

God knows what is going on in your heart. Are you willing to be undignified in prayer and tell God how you really feel?

What does this kind of prayer communicate about who God is and the type of relationship he wants to have with us?

I hope your exposure to the Psalms will help you be less inhibited when you pray. God wants to hear about your anxiety, hopes and dreams, frustrations, desires, anger, joy and disappointments.

- **They show us how to affirm what is true.**

While it is necessary and essential to honestly communicate our feelings to God, we also need to affirm what God says is true. The psalmists are very emotional, but they also teach us how to submit our emotions to truth in God's Word.

For example, in Psalm 42 and 43, we see the repeated refrain:

**(Psalm 42:5) “Why are you in despair, O my soul?  
Why have you become disturbed within me?  
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him.  
For the help of his presence.”**

The author questions himself and challenges his state of despair: “WHY are you in despair?” Then he focuses on what is praiseworthy about God and reminds himself that God is willing to help.

Asaph admits:

**(Psalm 73:3) “For I was envious of the arrogant  
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”**

But he remembers that he is a role model for other people who follow God...

**(Psalm 73:15) “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’  
behold, I would have betrayed the  
generation of Your children.”**

...and he reminds himself that ultimately, all people will be called to account.

**(Psalm 73:27,28) “For, behold, those who are far from  
you will perish;**

**you have destroyed all those who  
are unfaithful to You.  
But as for me,  
the nearness of God is  
my good;  
I have made the Lord God my refuge,  
that I may tell of all your works.”**

The temptation to abandon God’s truth arises in many situations. Through the Psalms we learn the discipline of talking to ourselves and not taking the counsel of our feelings.

- **They show us how to appreciate *who God is*.**

**(Psalm 29:2) “Give honor to the Lord for the glory of his name.  
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.”**

The Psalms are a window into God’s character. They help deepen our understanding of what he is like. But more than that, we learn how to enjoy him and express enjoyment to him and to others. We’ll see how true this is as we look more closely at the different kinds of Psalms.

### **Who wrote the Psalms and how are they organized?**

**Authors:** One Psalm was written by **Moses**, 73 by **David**, 12 by **Asaph**, 10 by the sons of **Korah**, one or two by Solomon, and one each by **Heman** and **Ethan**. The rest are anonymous. The Psalms are often called the Psalms of David because he is the principal author.

The entire collection was written over a long period of time (from Exodus to Exile), but most were written during the time of David.<sup>5</sup>

**Organization:** The book of Psalms is **a collection of smaller collections**. In the Hebrew Bible, the Psalms are grouped into 5 smaller books: **Psalm 1-41; Psalm 42-72; Psalm 73-89; Psalm 90-106; Psalm 107-150**. Within these books there are hints of additional groupings.

### **Different Kinds of Psalms**

Instructors: Refer students to the handout titled, *Kinds of Psalms*, but don’t go over it in class. Cover each of kind of Psalm below as time permits.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Psalms were collected over time and maybe in a series of stages: during or at the end of David's life (c.f. 1Chr.23:2-6); during the reign of Jehosahaphat (c.f. 2Chr.17:7-9; 20:19); during the reign of Hezekiah (2Chr.29:25-30; Prov.25:1) and possibly during the times of Ezra & Nehemiah (Neh.12:27-30, 45-47).

We can't study all 150 of the Psalms, but we can expose you to a few different kinds of Psalms and provide you with some simple tools for studying them.

If you read 5 scholars on this topic, you'll get 7 opinions on how to classify the Psalms. Some Psalms will fit in the categories on the *Kinds of Psalms* handout, some may be a mixture of these categories, and some may not fit neatly in any category.

## Gratitude – Psalm 107

### Structure:

Psalms of *praise* and *gratitude* have many similarities. The word “praise” occurs in both types of psalms. But Psalms of GRATITUDE tend to focus more on WHAT GOD HAS DONE. Psalms of PRAISE focus more on WHO GOD IS.

The typical structure is very simple:

- **Opening announcement expressing a desire to thank God.**

(Psalm 107:1) “O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, For His lovingkindness is everlasting.”

- **A description of distresses faced and God's deliverance.**

See **Psalm 107:6,13,19,28**. Each of these verses summarizes a section describing God's deliverance.

- **Conclusion** – usually a word of praise or closing command.

(Psalm 107:43) “Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD.”

### The importance of gratitude

Gratitude is a key emphasis in the Psalms and repeatedly commanded throughout the Bible:

(Psalm 95:2) “Let us come before his presence with *thanksgiving*, let us shout joyfully to him with Psalms.”

(Psalm 107:1) “Oh *give thanks* to the Lord, for He is good, for his lovingkindness is everlasting.”

(1 Chronicles 16:8) “Oh *give thanks* to the Lord, call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples.”

**(Colossians 3:15) “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and *be thankful.*”**

**(Hebrews 12:28) “Therefore, since we have received a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us *show gratitude*, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe...”**

Most Christians would agree God has given us good reason to be grateful, but maintaining a grateful attitude is difficult to do. We are continually exposed to advertising geared towards making us feel discontent:

**"Next to Christianity, advertising is the greatest force in the world. And I say that without sacrilege or disrespect. Advertising makes people discontented. It makes them want things they don't have."<sup>6</sup>**

We also tend to compare our station in life with that of people around us. And when we come up short, we experience powerful feelings of discontent.

The result is that we tend to ignore the many ways God has blessed us and instead judge his goodness on one or two very narrow criteria (a.k.a. idols) that are important to us. Will he give me the job, relationship, etc. that I want?

It's very typical for people (especially overfed, wealthy, and coddled Americans!) to be ungrateful. Do you remember the story in Luke 17 where Jesus heals 10 lepers? Only one of them returned to thank him. How typical of us.

An ungrateful Christian is an absurdity in many ways. We have so much to be thankful for. But more than that, ingratitude is a sign of sickness—a spiritual cancer that can be very destructive. In Romans 1:18 ff, Paul describes our ingratitude (“they did not honor God or give him thanks”) and the rebellion and corruption it ultimately produced.

Gratitude is an area we all need to grow in and there is much to learn in the Psalms. Learning to be grateful, to express our gratitude, and to model it before others is essential for own spiritual health and fruitfulness.

### **Application:**

#### **1. *Cultivate gratitude in your own life.***

Here is a practical suggestion modeled after Psalm 107. You could remember and meditate upon God's awesome deeds in your own life. Block

---

<sup>6</sup> Former advertising executive Ray Locke quoted in *Selling Discontent* by Anna White in the New American Dream a web magazine located at <http://www.newdream.org/newsletter/discontent.php>.

out some time to sit down and reflect on what God has done for you. Write each “wonderful deed” down. Ask yourself where your life would be if God had not intervened.

2. *Let gratitude be your motivation for service.*

**“(The cross) is the measure of the goodness of God; lay it to heart. Ask yourself the Psalmist’s question – ‘What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me?’ See grace to give this answer – ‘I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord... O Lord, truly I am thy servant... I will pay vows unto the Lord now...’ (Psalm 116:12ff.)”<sup>7</sup>**

Effective service is deeply rooted in heartfelt gratitude, gratitude we can cultivate by imitating gratitude expressed in the Psalms.

3. *Cultivate gratitude in your home church.*

God’s love and desire to bless us cultivates gratitude in our own hearts. But how can you act in a way that provokes gratitude in the lives of people in your home church?

- Give without expectations. (Luke 6:35-36)
- Express your thanks to God around people in your group in an open and unrestrained way.
- Help them see how God is at work in their lives, especially during low points.
- Challenge them to thank God for what he has done for other people.

## **Praise – Psalm 103**

### **Structure:**

Praise psalms are often more general in their content and more focused on who God is rather than what he has done. When God’s actions are described, they are frequently used to detail aspects of God’s character, which are then praised by the Psalmist.

- **Call to praise God**

**“Bless (praise – NLT, NIV) the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name.” (103:1)**

- **Reasons for praise.** Here are a few examples...

---

<sup>7</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1977) p. 150.

- **Because he cares for the oppressed (103:6).**
  - **Because he is compassionate and gracious (103:8).**
  - **Because he is sovereign and rules over all (103:19).**
- **A conclusion – often a repetition of the opening call to praise**

**“Bless the Lord, O my soul.” (103:22)**

### **The importance of praise:**

We are commanded to praise God throughout the Bible:

**(Psalm 135:1) “Praise the LORD. Praise the name of the LORD; praise him, you servants of the LORD...”**

**(Hebrews 13:5) “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name.”**

But **why would God be so intent on receiving praise from us?** Is God insecure? Did he create creatures and demand praise from them because he needs to be liked and valued? If he doesn't command us to praise him because he needs it, why should we praise him?

#### *1. Because God deserves it.*

**“For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;  
he is to be feared above all gods.  
For all the gods of the nations are idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens.  
Splendor and majesty are before him;  
strength and joy in his dwelling place.  
Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength,  
ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name.” – 1  
Chronicles 16:25-29**

Praise is sane because it corresponds to reality. Praise is a true estimation of God's value. Praise is appropriate because God is worthy of praise! To not praise him is to deny this fact. There is a certain insanity in the life of a Christian who does not regularly praise God. He or she must be deluded or indifferent to who God really is.

#### *2. Because it benefits US.*

**(C. S. Lewis) “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy**

**because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation... the delight is incomplete till it is expressed... the worthier the object the more intense this delight would be.”<sup>8</sup>**

If you’ve ever seen an excellent movie, read a good book, or just come back from a great vacation, you know that Lewis is right. Without someone to share our experience with, our joy is incomplete.

Through praise, God is helping us learn to enjoy him.

**(C. S. Lewis) “To fully enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”<sup>9</sup>**

*3. Because our praise is a sign of our own maturity.*

We don’t ask our children to be grateful in order to validate our role in their life or to feed our ego needs. We’re delighted when they are grateful because it shows that they’ve become less self-centered and more aware of the contribution that others make.

**Application:**

**1. Choose a psalm of praise and *pattern your own prayer after it.*** Put a psalm of praise into your own words. Tell God how awesome he is, how good he is, how faithful he is. Say it out loud because it’s true. Say it because it ought to be said. (MY EXPERIENCE DOING THIS)

**2. Praise God together in your *home group prayer meeting.*** Some groups exclusively focus on praising God during a portion of their prayer meeting. This boosts everyone’s confidence in God and fosters a profound sense of unity.

**3. Start your own time of prayer with praise.** Praising God helps us remember *who* we are praying to. As we appreciate God’s qualities (his goodness, faithfulness, sovereignty, etc.) we draw strength from him. If we start with praise, our petitions will more likely be an exercise in faith and not just an expression of our anxieties.

**Messianic Psalms**

Note to the instructor: This section is FYI only. Pick a few verses from the list below to illustrate and move quickly.

---

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York, New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1986), pp. 95-96.

<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York, New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1986), p. 97.

Jesus taught the disciples to look for references to him in the Old Testament, and specifically in the Psalms:

**(Luke 24:44) He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets *and the Psalms* must be fulfilled.”**

The career of Christ, his suffering, death, resurrection and return as king Messiah are all described in the Psalms. Key chapters include Psalm 2, 8, 16, 22, and 110.

Compare the passages on the right with each text in Psalms on the left to see how the New Testament authors applied various Psalms to Jesus.

**2:7** Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5 ; 5:5

**2:8, 9** Revelation 2:26, 27; 12:5; 19:15

**8:2** Matthew 21:16

**8:4-6** Hebrews 2:6-8

**8:6** 1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22

**16:8-11** Acts 2:25-28

**16:10b** Acts 13:35

**18:2b** Hebrews 2:13

**18:49** Romans 15:9

**22:1** Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34

**22:7** Matthew 27:39; Mark 15:29; Luke 23:35

**22:8** Matthew 27:43

**22:18** John 19:24; compare Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34

**22:22** Hebrews 2:12

**110:1** Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42, 43; Acts 2:34, 35; Hebrews 1:13.

Compare. Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:6,2; 16:19; Luke 22:69; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12, 13; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22.

**110:4** Hebrews 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21<sup>10</sup>

### **Application restrictions for all the Psalms**

**1.** *Learn what the imagery meant to the original audience.*

The images used in the Psalms were meant for people living in a specific time and culture. Many of the metaphors and similes are foreign to our experience. Unless you take to time to understand what these images meant to the original audience, you'll miss the point of many verses or associate the images with something from your own experience that wasn't in the mind of the author.

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from <http://www.jesuswalk.com/psalms/psalms-NT-quotations.htm>.

## Examples:

**(Psalm 26:6) “He [the Lord] made Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a wild ox.**

The psalmist is referring to Mt. Hermon (“Sirion”) and Mt. Lebanon. If you aren’t aware that these are mountains, and if you have no sense of how imposing these particular mountains are (Mount Hermon is the site of Israel’s only ski and snowboarding resort; both are over 10,000+ feet high), you can’t fully appreciate what the Psalmist is saying. Imagine God making these imposing mountains skip like a calf. This word picture conveys the incredible power of God.

**(Psalm 114:5-7) “Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back... Tremble, O earth at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock into a pool – the hard rock into springs of water.”**

Only by understanding Israel’s unique history would you associate these phrases with the parting of the red sea, the crossing of the Jordan, and God providing water from a rock in the wilderness for his people.

The best way to understand what the images meant to the original audience is by reading a good commentary. We’ve already recommended the *Bible Background Commentary*<sup>11</sup>. Another good one specifically on the Psalms is Derek Kidner’s two-volume set<sup>12</sup> (part of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series).

2. *Read individual verses in context.* The literary unit is the entire Psalm.

e.g. **(Psalm 105:34) “He spoke and the locusts came, grasshoppers without number.”**

This verse depicts grasshoppers and locusts as God’s special agents to accomplish his purposes. But in what sense? The context supplies the answer: the grasshoppers and locusts were part of the 10 plagues that God unleashed on the Egyptians. God used these plagues to force Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.

---

<sup>11</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 832 pages.

<sup>12</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series: Psalms 1 – 72* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1981)  
Derek Kidner, *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series: Psalms 73 – 150* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1981)

## Studying and applying psalms of praise and gratitude

See handout. Instructors, spend some time going through Psalm 103 and the example provided on the worksheet.

## Proverbs

**Definition of a proverb:** A proverb is usually *a saying or maxim (rule of thumb) which gives insight into how to live wisely.*<sup>13</sup>

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings: some are fairly long (Proverbs 1-9, 31), but most are “proverbial” sayings—short, memorable statements that convey valuable nuggets of wisdom (chapters 10-30).

### Who wrote Proverbs?

**Most of the Proverbs are attributed to David’s son Solomon (cf. I Kings 4:32; Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1), but he did not write all of them (cf. 30:1; 31:1).**

**The purpose of the book of Proverbs:** *to know and understand wisdom.*

Solomon clearly reveals his purpose for writing in **Proverbs 1:1-6**.

Today we have access to 24-hour cable news and learning channels, the internet, and books and magazines on any topic imaginable. But is the glut of information making us wise?

**"Diffusion of knowledge is the dominant trend of our time... But knowledge is not the same thing as wisdom. Knowledge can produce equally powerful ways to destroy life, intentionally and unintentionally. It can produce hate and seek destruction. Knowledge does not by itself bring any answer to the ancient Greek question ‘What is a Good Life?’ It does not produce good sense, courage, generosity and tolerance. And most crucially, it does not produce the farsightedness that will allow us all to live together—and grow together—on this world without causing war, chaos and catastrophe. For that we need wisdom.”<sup>14</sup>**

Learning how to drive a car doesn’t guarantee you’ll make good decisions behind the wheel. We all know well-informed people who frequently make foolish decisions.

Notice how Solomon equates wisdom with “instruction in wise *behavior*.” (Proverbs 1:3) Wisdom involves discernment (1:2), prudence (1:4), discretion (1:4), and understanding.

**Wisdom, then, is not just the accumulation of information... wisdom is the *skillful use***

<sup>13</sup> *The New Inductive Study Bible: Updated New American Standard Bible* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2000), p. 1018.

<sup>14</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “The Earth’s Learning Curve,” *Newsweek*, Issues 2006 (see <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10206249/site/newsweek/>)

of information.

**A key concept in Proverbs: the fear of God.**

**(Proverbs 1:7) “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction.”**

Solomon says that fearing God is the pathway to wisdom, but what does it involve?

**To fear God is to:** *humbly entrust yourself to God and align yourself with him.* Contrast this with a dog’s fear of being punished for scattering trash all over the house.

**(Proverbs 14:26) “In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and his children will have refuge.”**

**(Proverbs 23:17) “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but live in the fear of the LORD always. 18 Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off.”**

**(Proverbs 8:13a) “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil...”**

**The opposite of fearing God is *being a fool.*** We use the word “fool” to refer to someone who makes stupid decisions. But a fool in the biblical sense is someone lives their life with no regard for God.

**(Psalm 14:1)** The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."

**Implication for the reader:** Solomon’s emphasis on fearing God has obvious implications for the reader... Are you willing to humbly entrust yourself to God’s power and faithfulness? Do you see him as a source of truth, someone whose counsel should be heeded? Are you willing to act on his wisdom and trust him that his way is best?

The book of Proverbs assumes that we need guidance in living wisely. Solomon warns:

**(Proverbs 14:12, 16:25) “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”**

We should search our hearts and ask, “Do I fear God?” as we read these books. *Without the fear of God, we won’t benefit from the wisdom they contain.*

**Application restrictions**

**1. Proverbs tend to be general maxims that speak the truth but not the whole truth. They do not deal with the exceptions.**

For example, here's a proverb that says a man's enemies will be at peace with him when his ways please the Lord:

**(Proverbs 16:7) When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.**

We can accept this as a valid proverb which generally proves to be true, though not always. Jesus' enemies were not at peace with him even though he did only those things which pleased his father.

## 2. You must interpret a SINGLE proverb in light of ALL of the proverbs.

Example: Consider the proverbs in the column on the left. Read in isolation, they might lead one to become a crass materialist! These maxims have to be weighed against what the rest of the book teaches (see the right column).

<p><b>8:18 With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity.</b></p> <p><b>10:4 Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.</b></p> <p><b>10:22 The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.</b></p> <p><b>14:24 The wealth of the wise is their crown, but the folly of fools yields folly.</b></p> <p><b>22:4 Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life.</b></p>	<p><b>11:4 Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.</b></p> <p><b>11:28 Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.</b></p> <p><b>19:1 Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a fool whose lips are perverse.</b></p> <p><b>22:1 A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.</b></p> <p><b>30:8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.</b></p>
--	--

The cautions of 11:4, 28; 19:1; 22:1 and 30:8 temper the maxims of 8:18; 10:4; 10:22; 14:24; 22:4 on material riches.

### Job's friends: an example of misusing proverbial wisdom

Job's friends are a good illustration of how proverbial wisdom can be misused in a dogmatic and callous way. They quote maxims to Job...

**(Job 11:13,15) "If you devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him...you will surely forget your trouble, recalling it only as waters gone by."**

**(Job 11:20) But the eyes of the wicked will fail, and escape will elude them; their hope will become a dying gasp."**

...and their implication is obvious: through his sin, Job has brought his suffering on himself. But Job's friends fail to understand the nature of these sayings. They do teach that wise living generally results in a better life. But they don't promise that good and wise people will never suffer. Taking proverbial wisdom in an absolute way was probably behind the disciple's assumption that a man's blindness is due to his sin or the sin of his parents (John 9).

Hurt and angered by their simplistic thinking, Job responds:

**(Job 13:4,12a) You... smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you... your maxims are proverbs of ashes.**

Don't take proverbs meant to encourage wise living and use them insensitively. With maxims, there is always an exception to the rule.

## **Conclusion**

*Make it your goal to read the entire Old Testament.*

While getting familiar with the story revealed in the narrative sections, take a stab at a prophet or a wisdom book some time this year.

Develop a broad familiarity with the Old Testament books by reading some of them each year. Make progress each year.

Use the tools we've given you in Intro to the Bible and this class to read and apply this important part of the Bible.

The more you read the Old Testament, the better you will understand the New Testament.

## **Memory Verses**

**Psalm 42 & 43\*\* – Why are you downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him.**

**Psalm 107\*\* – God rescues those who cry out to him. Give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.**

**Proverbs 1:7\* – “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.”**

## **Assignment**

Complete the *Acts Assignment*.