

THE BOOKS OF POETRY: Part Three

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

There are many holy books. Judaism accepts the Torah, the Old Testament. Other religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Islam all have their sacred writings.

But we're operating from the premise here that there is only *one* Bible. Its purpose is to disclose to people in every culture God's plans and purposes for time and eternity.

The vast scope of the Bible covers man's arrival on a sin-free planet, the introduction of the fatal sin virus when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and thus, according to the inspired writers, allowed sin and death to enter our world. The rest of the Bible is the story of God's love for all mankind and of His ultimately successful efforts to pave the way for us to be forgiven and become the people of God that He wants us to be.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Diving into this remarkable collection of sound-bites of insight into human behavior, it's hard to believe this "wisdom literature" was written almost 3,000 years ago. Some perhaps during the Bronze Age.

Amazingly, they're street-smart counsel concerning relationships, marriage, money, sex, business, power, recreation, parenting -- all the stuff that touches our daily lives in the 90s.

In the first verse the author is identified as Solomon, the third king of Israel. Throughout the book other authors are mentioned (Agur, Jakeh, Ithiel, Lemuel and Ucal). Solomon probably wrote many of these wise sayings and just published the rest from his vast literary collection. Jewish scholars say these other authors are merely synonyms for Solomon.

Born about 1,035 years before Christ, Solomon was David's second son by Bathsheba and took the throne in his late teen years. This is contemporary with the founding of the Republic of Athens and the start of the mass migration of Germanic tribes, about 300 years before Rome was founded.

Solomon reigned forty years, a golden age of Jewish history when the Hebrew monarchy was the envy of the world. He was perhaps the world's first true Renaissance man. Among his many exploits he:

- oversaw the building of the famous temple in Jerusalem
- surrounded himself with all the toys and glitter of an Eastern potentate
- built cities and fortresses and aqueducts
- amassed untold wealth by trading with Tyre, Egypt, Arabia, Spain, India and the coastal governments of Africa
- wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs
- became an expert on forestry, zoology, the arts, etc.
- entertained the world's who's who came to gawk at Solomon's feats

- acquired 700 wives and 300 concubines (making him the original “man of a thousand faces” and the founder of the 700 Club!)

But during the second half of his reign he wandered far from his devotion to the one true God, lured by the idolatrous, pagan women in his palace. God began to frown on Solomon’s spiritual slippage. Suddenly his armies began to suffer defeats, his subjects began to worship idols in public and his personal life crumbled.

A historian named Rawlinson writes in *Historical Illustrations*, “The kingdom of Solomon is one of the most striking facts in the Biblical history. A petty nation, which for hundreds of years has with difficulty maintained a separate existence in the midst of warlike tribes, each of which has in turn exercised dominion over it and oppressed it, is suddenly raised by the genius of a soldier-monarch to glory and greatness. An empire is established which extends from the Euphrates to Egypt, a distance of 450 miles; and this empire, rapidly constructed, enters almost immediately on a period of peace which lasts half a century. Wealth, grandeur, architectural magnificence, artistic excellence, commercial enterprise, a position of dignity among the great nations of the earth, are enjoyed during this space, at the end of which there is a sudden collapse.”

Solomon wrote two other Old Testament books. As a young man, he wrote Song of Solomon. During his middle years he wrote Proverbs. In his later years he wrote Ecclesiastes.

His purpose in writing Proverbs is to teach his readers -- especially younger ones -- that a meaningful life involves more than wealth or pleasure. True satisfaction comes from acquiring the wisdom of God, allowing us mere mortals to view the world from God’s perspective. This, the author maintains, gives us the ability to persevere through the victories, defeats and dog days of life.

In the first chapter of this book Solomon defines the source of wisdom as the ongoing decision to trust and revere God. When he writes (in verse 7) that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,” that word “fear” doesn’t mean cowering before an abusive Superior Being. It means to acknowledge God’s power and love for us and our ultimate dependence upon Him. That, Solomon says, is the accurate software that, when downloaded personally, will permeate all that we think, say and do, teaching us how to obey God and how to deal with each other. As Creator of the universe, God is the Source of all wisdom and knowledge. As we build our lives on this Truth, we will live that satisfying life.

Proverbs has 31 chapters. Many people read one a day, month after month. In its pages are practical solutions to everyday problems -- totally down-to-earth advice on how to live life skillfully.

“Proverbs” means “to be like, or, to represent.” These hard-hitting statements are a handbook on how to maximize life and avoid trouble. In Proverbs the reader is presented with two choices: the path of righteousness and the path of foolishness. Solomon holds up a mirror for us to discover which path we’re on.

Although this is called a book of poetry, Hebrew poetry doesn’t rhyme. Rather it uses contrast and comparison to communicate.

This book has three sections. Chapters 1-9 can be entitled “Pursue wisdom.” They’re written as a father to a child.

The original Hebrew word for “wisdom” is feminine. Here we see wisdom pictured as a woman: 1:20-21; 3:13-18; 8:1-6; 9:1-6.

Solomon also pictures the way of sin as an adulterous woman. (9:13-18) But he’s not simply talking about adultery. The seductress represents the way of sin. Like an enticing woman, sin leads us away from God. Rather than cave in to sin’s charms, Solomon urges his reader to choose God’s wisdom, making it your lifelong pursuit.

In the second section, chapters 10-24, we find “Instructions to those who choose wisdom.” These Post-It-sized maxims teach us how to live. If we want to be wise, to avoid having to pay the price of learning things the hard way, this is the good stuff.

Finally, in the third section, chapters 25-31, we find “Instructions to leaders.”

Proverbs concludes with an awesome chapter that’s a tribute to women of all ages. Throughout this book wisdom is personified as a woman. We’re encouraged to pursue her, embrace her, make her our cherished companion. She’s described as a beautiful, God-centered woman of righteousness. In the final chapter (31) we see wisdom as a mature, valued, long-term partner who’s honored by all. It is a towering tribute to both wisdom and women.

Proverbs is a flashlight, revealing where we are, what we’re to do, what we’re to avoid -- all of which creates greater peace of mind, character and security along life’s journey.

Let’s read some Proverbs now for ourselves. Because they’re like Dilettante Chocolates, they’re too rich to rip through. So, it’s a good idea to take a beat -- or pause just a second -- after each verse before diving into the next.

- **Proverbs 1**
- **Proverbs 4**
- **Proverbs 9**
- **Proverbs 12**
- **Proverbs 15-16**
- **Proverbs 19**
- **Proverbs 31:10-31**

A major theme of Proverbs is “the problem of the heart.” The heart is a central theme of the entire Bible as well. In fact, one researcher says it’s the most frequent term in the Bible, occurring 858 times. The vast majority of these refer to the heart as the center of our person, our true identity. (Proverbs 27:19 -- “As water reflects a face, so a man’s heart reflects the man.”)

The Bible pictures the heart as our core, who we really are, our inner self that directs our mind, emotions and will.

Solomon writes in Proverbs 4:23, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” It’s the source from which all of life flows. That’s why Solomon prayed to God as he began his 40-year reign, asking for wisdom. He wanted his heart to be tuned to hear from God. (Read I Kings 3:4-14.)

If our heart is right, we’ll have wisdom to make choices that lead us to becoming the man God wants us to be instead of what *we* want to be. What we want decides what we become. If our “wanter” software wants what *God* wants, according to the Manufacturer’s Handbook, things go a lot better.

In Matthew 6:21 Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Our hearts want to be filled. What we fill them with becomes our master, setting the course of our life.

Solomon describes the condition of our hearts before we download God’s software:

- Proverbs 20:9
- Proverbs 16:5
- Proverbs 19:3

To download this heavenly software, Solomon’s tutorial is found in **Proverbs 3. Let’s read it.**

ECCLESIASTES

The Greek word for “Ecclesiastes” refers to an audience listening to “The Teacher,” a phrase the author uses in the opening verse to describe himself.

Solomon is credited with authoring this book in which he all that life has to offer from an earthbound point of view, apart from faith in God. He states his conclusion in the second verse of this book of twelve chapters: ‘Meaninglessness! Everything is meaninglessness.’

His bottom line is that life has no permanence, no purpose, only perplexing emptiness and disappointment. All our accomplishments are footprints on a sandy shore, quickly washed away, forgotten.

Ecclesiastes represents the futile, depressing striving of mankind to discover meaning outside of knowing God. The message is that we can try materialism, pleasure, philosophy, fatalism, deism, pantheism, wealth, morality -- but all are dead-end streets, apart from God.

This book reminds us what people of all ages have discovered, i.e., no matter how much we have or know or do, it’s never enough to satisfy. Lasting purpose and joy is only found in knowing and centering our lives on the living God. Only then will we discover purpose and satisfaction.

Solomon traces his search for pleasure, wealth, wisdom and work. Even as the most respected man in all the world during his day, there was only despair without knowing and living with God. He waits ‘til the next-to-last verse in the book to spring this on us.

You may want to read Ecclesiastes for yourself sometime.

SONG OF SOLOMON

The third of Solomon's trilogy is a sexually explicit love poem. (*Now* that I've got your attention, you'll all turn into closet Bible students!)

This book is sometimes called Song of Songs. Check it out. You'll find words and phrases like kisses, perfume, wine, beautiful, breasts, eyes, bed, arouse, desires, darling, come with me, lips, lover.

Since God created sex, this book allows us to examine sex and love as God originally intended to be -- exciting, fascinating, joyful, normal and exclusively experienced between a husband and wife, living in God's good creation.

In this allegorical poem we see the intimate bride and bridegroom relationship that the New Testament writers use to describe the mutual love of Christ and His followers.

Perhaps the most beautiful love song ever penned, it was written about 950 B.C., just 50 years before the Celts invaded Britain -- another sad example of "lookin' for love in all the wrong places!"

His Deal

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