

CHAPTER 12: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon

God's people are now in Babylon and they are hanging onto a glimmer of hope. So, what exactly gives these people hope? As God's covenant people their hope is that long cord connecting what God did for them in the past with what He said He will do in the future. Right now, however, the future for them looks pretty bleak.

For the people living in exile, "hope" is not just some nice concept akin to the power of positive thinking. It is something quite tangible that they hold tightly to. Their hope is IN GOD. The full awareness of God's covenant promises to them and the blessed assurance that this provides for the future is where the Wisdom Literature (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) fits into the storyline.

Most of the Wisdom Literature had already been written by this time in Israel's history. The words penned by David, Solomon, Moses and others remind God's people of all aspects of God's character. While the circumstances may change, God does not. These books reminded the people back then and all of us even today of who God is and who we are. They paint a beautiful portrait in words of the kind of relationship God really desires to have with all mankind.

The main storyline that we have been following is transitioning from the period of Israel's monarchy to a dark period of exile. The Israelite people find themselves living far away from the land God promised them. They're sad and discouraged. As they remember the way things used to be, they cry out to God... **By the rivers of Babylon we sit down and weep when we remember Zion** (Jerusalem). (Psalm 137:1)

Moses had told the people what would happen if they were not faithful to God. This is very prophetic on Moses's part: **Then all the nations will ask, "Why has the Lord done all this to this land?" Then the people will say, "Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord...They went and served other gods and worshiped them... So the Lord has uprooted them from their land in anger, wrath and great rage and has deported them to another land, as is clear today."** (Deuteronomy 29:24-28)

So then, God's people know exactly why they are where they are at. It is God's judgment on them for their unfaithfulness and it is heartbreaking. What these people need at a time like this is hope. And that is precisely what these books offer them.

PSALMS

Contrary to popular opinion, Psalms is not the hymnbook of Old Testament Israel. Rather, it is a collection of 150 Hebrew poems, songs and prayers from different periods in Israel's history. Many of them, 73 in fact, were written by King David. But many other authors contributed besides David including Moses, Solomon and some of the Temple's worship leaders. Nearly one-third of the psalms are anonymous. We don't know who wrote them.

At five different places in Psalms the compilers inserted the headings, "Book 1," "Book 2," "Book 3," "Book 4," and "Book 5." These divide the Psalms into five sections. The final psalm in each section closes with a shout of praise to God, a doxology of sorts. For example Book 1 ends like this: **The Lord God of Israel deserves praise in the future and forevermore! We agree! We agree!** (Psalm 41:13)

Book 1 (Psalms 1 thru 41) comprises the original psalms. Most were written by David (37 of 41) and collected during his reign. Notice I said collected and not written. The structure of the psalms in these books is based on when they were compiled. Some were written many years before they were compiled.

Psalm 1 celebrates how blessed a person is who prayerfully reads God's law and obeys it. **How blessed is the one who does not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand in the pathway with sinners, or sit in the assembly of scoffers. Instead he finds pleasure in obeying the Lord's commands; he meditates on his commands day and night.** (Psalm 1:1-2)

Psalm 2 reflects on God's covenant promise to King David – one day a Messianic king will come, defeat evil and rule the nations. The psalmist calls on every person to surrender to this King. **Give sincere homage! Otherwise [the Lord] will be angry, and you will die because of your behavior, when His anger quickly ignites. How blessed are all who take shelter in Him!** (Psalm 2:12)

The themes of Psalm 1 and 2 are the two major themes that run throughout the entirety of Psalms. First, BE FAITHFUL to God's commands found in the Law; and second, EXPECTANT HOPE as we wait for the future Messianic kingdom.

The early psalms praise God for His mercy, unfailing love, forgiveness, justice, protection, bountiful care, deliverance, guidance, and goodness. They express a deep trust in God. **The Lord is My light and My salvation! Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life! Of whom shall I be afraid?** (Psalm 27:1); **Turn, Lord, and deliver me! Save me because of Your unfailing love!** (Psalm 6:4).

Psalms 16 thru 18 are David's memoirs as he reflects back on how he cried out to God; how God delivered him and he eventually raised him up to be the king. **The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust.** (Psalm 18:2)

Psalm 19 praises God for the Law. **Sweeter than honey are the decrees of the Lord.** (Psalm 19:10)

In Ps 20-23 David pictures the future Messianic king based on analogies drawn from his experiences such as when he was tending his father's sheep. **The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters.** (Psalm Ps 23:1-2) So there you have Book 1, most penned by David and compiled during his reign.

Book 2 (Psalms 42 thru 72) contains psalms collected during the time of Solomon. Again, most were written by David (18 of the 31). Like those we saw in Book 1 these psalms praise God for His protection, help, deliverance, power, strength, goodness, and justice. They are very similar in nature to the Book 1 psalms but compiled later. Deep emotions are expressed about situations that weigh heavy on the psalmist's heart – things like waiting for God to act, being betrayed by a friend, being overwhelmed by God's discipline (His judgment), feelings of anger against injustice, and facing one's own fear and weakness.

Psalms 42 and 43 look forward with hope to returning to Jerusalem to worship God in His holy city. David is away and is longing to go back and worship God. **Send me Your light and Your faithful care, let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy mountain, and to the place where You dwell.** (Psalm 43:3); **As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for You, my God!** (Psalm 42:1)

Psalm 47 expresses hope of a Messianic kingdom. **Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!** (Psalm Ps 47:1)

Psalm 51 was written by David after his sin with Bathsheba. He cries out for forgiveness, confesses his sin, pleads for cleansing, and for restoration of his joy. **Have mercy on me, O God, because of Your loyal love! Because of Your great compassion, wipe away my rebellious acts! Wash away my wrongdoing! Cleanse me of my sin! Create in me a pure heart, O God! Renew a resolute spirit within me!** (Psalm 51:1-2,10)

Psalm 72 celebrates the future reign of the Messiah over all the nations. This reign will fulfill God's promise to Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations. **Praise be to the Lord God... May the whole earth be filled with His glory!** (Psalm 72:19) So that in a

nutshell gives you the idea of Books 1 and 2 – most written by David, very personal in nature and very emotional.

Book 3 (Psalms 73 thru 89) is a collection of psalms from the time of the exile in Babylon. Most were written by Asaph and the sons of Korah (worship leaders in the temple). These psalms look back at Israel's history. They focus on the destruction of Israel and they cry out to God for help. These psalms are relatively recent for the people who are in exile.

Psalm 80 is a prayer for national revival. **Restore us, O God; Let Your face shine that we may be saved!** (Psalm 80:3)

Psalm 89 reflects on God's covenant promise to David for an eternal kingdom, but this time it is seen in the light of Israel's exile. The psalmist remembers that God said He would never abandon the royal line of David. But now he is looking at the situation they are in, at the terrible consequences of Israel's rebellion. He ends by pleading with God not to forget His promise to David. **How long, O Lord? Will You hide Yourself forever? How long will Your wrath burn like fire?** (Psalm 89:46) The reference here is to God's wrath against His covenant people. That is Book 3, psalms from the exile.

Book 4 (Psalms 90 thru 106) also dates from the time of the exile, but most of these psalmists are anonymous. These psalms largely respond to the crisis of exile. They express confidence that God will protect and deliver His people.

Psalm 90 takes us back to Israel's early days with a prayer of Moses. The context of this prayer is the apostasy among the people that took place on Mount Sinai with the golden calf incident. Moses calls upon God to show mercy to His people and we know that He did. Moses's prayer for mercy back then offers the people, who are now in exile, with some hope for their future. **For a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.** (Psalm 90:4); **Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.** (Psalm 90:12)

Psalms 93 to 100 announce that the Lord the God of Israel reigns as the true King of the world. All creation is summoned to celebrate that future day – again looking forward to the Messianic kingdom – when God will bring His justice and kingdom to the world. **Mightier than the waves of the sea is His love for you.** (Psalm 93:4); **For the Lord is good, His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations.** (Psalm 100:5); **You, O Lord, are the Most High over all the earth, exalted far above all gods.** (Psalm 97:9) So there you have Book 4.

Book 5 (Psalms 107 thru 150) contains psalms compiled after the Jews return home from their exile. A major theme is that God hears the cries of His people and will one day send a future King to defeat evil and bring about God's kingdom.

Psalms 113 to 118 are called “The Hallel” (which means “praise”). They were read during the Passover. **From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised.** (Psalm 113:3); **The faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!** (Psalm 117:2); **This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.** (Psalm 118:24)

Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, 176 verses, explores the wonders of God’s Law. **I have hidden Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You.** (Psalm 119:11); **Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.** (Psalm 119:105)

Psalms 120 to 134 are called “Songs of Ascent.” These were songs the people would have sung as they went up to worship God in Jerusalem every year. These provide hope for a future act of God to redeem His people. **I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.** (Psalm 121:1-2)

Psalms 146 to 150 praise the God of Israel. Each one ends with the word “Hallelujah” (which means, “Praise Yahweh!”). **Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!** (Psalm 150:6)

The Psalms basically fall into one of two categories – psalms of lament or psalms of praise. Psalms of lament express the psalmist feelings of pain, confusion and anger at how bad things are. These poems point to what is wrong in the world and ask God to do something about it. Our laments, our cries to God are a proper response to the evil we see in our world. Lament poems predominate earlier in Psalms, in Books 1 thru 3.

Praise poems or psalms of praise are poems of joy and celebration. They draw attention to what is good in the world. They focus on what God is doing and thank Him for it. In Books 4 and 5 the praise poems outnumber the lament poems and conclude with the Hallelujah section.

So then, the book of Psalms is really a prayer book. It teaches us to be honest with ourselves and with God about all that is going on in our lives, even the deep pain and regret we feel. We learn about faith and hope. They are in God alone. We look forward to all that God has promised. We have a hope of a future Messianic kingdom even if we do not know much about it at this point. But we realize that God is purposeful and that He is going somewhere with all of this!

PROVERBS

The opening line ties the book of Proverbs to King Solomon. **The Proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:** (Proverbs 1:1). Recall earlier when Solomon asked God for wisdom to lead Israel (1 Kings 3) God granted his request and he became wiser than anyone in the world. He later composed thousands of proverbs and poems. He tells us that the purpose of the book is... **To learn wisdom and moral instruction, and to discern wise counsel. To receive moral instruction in skillful living, in righteousness, justice and equity.** (Proverbs 1:2-3) So then, by reading the book of Proverbs we can develop good and practical life skills.

The book begins with a series of speeches from a father to a son. The son is to listen to the father's instruction, to fear God and avoid hanging around the wrong crowd. The father warns his son about fools and evil people. They are all around us. Listening to such people will result in making bad decisions. It will produce selfishness and pride. And eventually it all leads to a life of ruin and shame. So, the son needs to pursue wisdom as a top priority.

Wise advice from a father is followed by four poems from Lady Wisdom. Here wisdom is personified as a woman who calls out to anyone who will listen to her. We can actually see Lady Wisdom everywhere. When people make wise decisions or show integrity or uphold justice, Lady Wisdom is there. These speeches from the father and from Lady Wisdom are more than just good sound advice. They are, in fact, God's words of wisdom being handed down to the next generation.

When people think of Proverbs what usually comes to mind are all those short, wise sayings. We are familiar with many of them. **A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.** (Proverbs 15:1); **The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of the holy one is understanding.** (Proverbs 9:10); **Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.** (Proverbs 16:18)

Proverbs applies the wisdom and the fear of the Lord to everyday life. It is a very practical book.

There's something to keep in mind about the proverbs. They are not promises. Instead they are guidelines to follow if we want to have a long, happy and successful life. Let me give you an example of what I mean. **Train a child in the way that he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.** (Proverbs 22:6) While it is true that raising your children in a stable God-centered home provides them a solid foundation and sets them on the right path in their life, there are no guarantees. There are so many unforeseen variables beyond our control that can adversely influence

them. Life is hard. As we learned from the book of Job, life is much too complex to apply simplistic, one size fits all, rules for every situation.

While most of the proverbs were penned by Solomon the last two were not. Proverbs 30 was written by Agur, the son of Jakeh. We know nothing about him. But by God's providence his words made it into the Bible. He acknowledges his own ignorance and expresses his need for God's wisdom. Agur discovers that God's wisdom has been given to us in the Scriptures and they teach us how to live well. **Every word of God is flawless; He is a shield to those that take refuge in Him.** (Proverbs 30:5)

Proverbs 31 is connected to King Lemuel. He is a non-Israelite king. Again we don't know anything about this guy. He passes on wisdom that he learned from his mother. His proverb is about the wife of noble character. It pictures a woman who lives according to the wisdom of Proverbs. She applies God's wisdom to practical matters in her everyday life – at work, at home, with her family and in her social settings. **Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.** (Proverbs 31:30)

So then, the book of Proverbs is indeed wisdom for living. But it is more than just sound advice. Through the words of good men and women with God-given wisdom, the Lord is speaking to us. Are we listening? Are we learning? Do we fear Him and trust Him?

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. Acknowledge Him in all your ways, and He will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5-6).

In Proverbs and the Bible when you hear about "straight paths" versus "crooked paths," that is the same thing we have been referring to as "top line" and "bottom line." Are we doing things God's way? Are we top line or bottom line people?

ECCLESIASTES

The book of Ecclesiastes explores the age-old question, “What’s the meaning of life?” Why are we even here? Does anything in life really matter? Ecclesiastes is a wise man’s search for purpose. So then, who is this wise man?

[Slide 53] The book opens with the line... **The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.** (Ecclesiastes 1:1) The Teacher is not identified by name, but is widely held to be Solomon. The Teacher is the son of King David (1:1). Later in the book we will see that the Teacher possesses great wisdom (1:13, 16 and 12:9); he possesses great wealth (2:8); he owns many servants (2:7); he is involved in many projects (2:4-6); and he arranged many proverbs (12:9). These describe King Solomon perfectly. So that is the reason why Solomon is widely held to be the Teacher.

The Teacher opens with this declaration... **“Futile! Futile!” laments the Teacher, “Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!”** (Ecclesiastes 1:2) Everything in life is meaningless. In the Teacher’s words life is like chasing the wind (Ecclesiastes 1:14). What a depressing message! Why does the Teacher say all of this?

To understand his argument in the book of Ecclesiastes, we must fast forward to the end of the book. **Having heard everything, I have reached this conclusion: Fear God and keep His commandments, because this is the whole duty of man. For God will evaluate every deed, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.** (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Basically what the Teacher does throughout this book is he identifies all the various ways that we try to find meaning and purpose in our lives apart from God. It is all futile! Bear this in mind as the Teacher hammers home his message regarding the futility, the emptiness of life.

The Teacher says that we spend so much of our time, energy and emotions on things that really have no significance. We’re not going to take anything with us when we die. We’re going to lose it all in the end. We’re born into this world and eventually we die without really changing much. Nobody will remember us after we’re gone. Life doesn’t bring us to a climatic point of fulfillment. Listen to the Teacher’s frustration... **For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill; however, he must hand over the fruit of his labor as an inheritance to someone else who did not work for it. This is also futile, and an awful injustice!** (Ecclesiastes 2:21)

So what is the point of it all? There must be something outside of ourselves that gives life its real meaning. It seems as though we are always looking and listening to find meaning. But we’re never satisfied. We just keep looking and the clock keeps ticking.

The Teacher shares his own personal testimony. He basically says, “I tried it all. I explored every field of wisdom. I studied every belief system. But nothing gave meaning to me. It was like chasing the wind.” He goes on to tell how he pursued fulfillment through personal pleasure. He embraced wine, women and song. After that he tried accomplishments – “I made, I built, I bought, I possessed and I planted...” Then he pursued wealth. Here is a man who literally had it all, but he found no ultimate value in any of it..

Trying to find meaning in the temporal things of this world produces nothing but emptiness and grief. And on and on it goes like this throughout the rest of the book. The refrain repeated is: **All of these things are futile!** (Ecclesiastes 12:8). The Teacher does acknowledge the ideas expressed in Proverbs (he wrote them) – the importance of living by wisdom and the fear of God. On the whole, living this way tends to make our lives go better. But then he says that even this is futile. Why does he say that? Because right living is no guarantee of a good life, not in this world. Good people die young all the time. And bad people live long lives and prosper. Even this is futile!

So then, how do we deal with the futility of life?

As the book of Ecclesiastes nears its end, the Teacher recognizes the key to truly enjoying life here and now in this world – ACCEPT life’s futility! Acknowledge that most everything in our life is outside our control. Just enjoy the simple, good things in life that you now have – friendship, family, good food, a nice vacation or a beautiful sunny day. We cannot control many things in life and we certainly are not guaranteed much at all. When we come to a place of total trust in God, we are free to simply enjoy our life as we actually experience it. Not as we think it ought to be.

When all is said and done the key to a fulfilling and happy life can be summarized this way: **Fear God and keep His commandments.** (12:13). Obey what you know to obey, enjoy what you can enjoy, and wait on the timing and the purposes of God.

SONG OF SOLOMON

This book is a love story set to poetry. The writer, Solomon, calls it a “most excellent love song” (Song 1:1). The main characters are a young couple, a handsome man and a beautiful woman. The man is identified as King Solomon (Song of Solomon 3:7, 9) The woman is never named, but Solomon refers to her as “**O Perfect One**” (Song of Solomon 6:13) This couple is deeply in love with each other!

We follow the young lovers through the early stages of their romance and courtship. They are mutually attracted to each other. We listen in on their conversation to each other... **[King Solomon:] “Oh, how beautiful you are, my beloved! Oh, how beautiful you are! Your eyes are like doves!” [His beloved:] “Oh, how handsome you are, my lover! Oh, how delightful you are!”** (Song of Solomon 1:15-16)

There’s an obvious physical attraction between them, but also an attraction to each other’s character. They love and respect each other. They treat each other well. They display their affections for each other publicly. She wants him and he wants her! She’s lovesick and longs for his embrace. He is aroused by her but shows self-restraint. He controls his sexual passions for her until they are married. They can’t wait to be together.

The young lovers delight in each other’s company. But as they talk, they discover new things about each other. And because nobody is without flaws they begin to see things in each other that are problematic. We see the first sign of conflict – there are foxes in their vineyard! **“Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil and ruin the vineyards [of love], while our vineyards are in blossom”** (Song of Solomon 2:15) These “foxes” represent problems that could potentially ruin their wonderful relationship. The young couple resolves to deal with them before they get out of hand.

Finally the big day arrives and the young couple marries. It is a grand and glorious wedding – the most joyous day of their lives! All Jerusalem gathers to celebrate the big day. **“Come out, O maidens of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon! He is wearing the crown with which his mother crowned him on his wedding day, on the most joyous day of his life!”** (Song of Solomon 3:11)

After the wedding comes the honeymoon. The wedding night is described in great detail in Chapter 4. Their strong desire for each other builds to a crescendo, culminating in a sexual relationship. Even though poetic language is used, it is obvious that these young lovers thoroughly enjoy each other! **“You are all together beautiful my darling; there is no flaw in you.”** (Song of Solomon 4:7)

No sooner does the honeymoon end and our couple faces conflict. He comes in after a hard day wanting intimacy. She apparently is not in the mood. So he leaves.

When she realizes he is gone she remembers how he made her feel and begins to long for him. She goes out searching for him into the night. **“I fell into despair when he departed. I looked for him but did not find him; I called him but he did not answer me.”** (Song of Solomon 5:6)

But this love story has a happy ending. They eventually find each other and make up. Solomon again romances his wife and passion once again develops in their relationship. Like before, she wants him and he wants her. **“I am my beloved’s, and he desires me!”** (Song of Solomon 7:10)

This is a nice story, but why is it here? It certainly shows us God’s design for marriage, harkening back to Genesis 2 – **Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.** (Genesis 2:24) And we can see that sex is a part of God’s plan and is to be enjoyed in the context of marriage. We watch as this young couple follows God’s plan for marriage and their lives are blessed. But this story is more than merely a commentary on a godly marriage.

The couple in our story beautifully pictures the covenant relationship that exists between God and His people. God loves and is committed to the nation of Israel. But for any marriage to work requires faithfulness and commitment by BOTH parties. We know that God is forever faithful to His people. We have seen this repeatedly throughout the story so far in the promises He has made – to Adam and Eve, Abraham, and David. We have seen God renew His commitment to His people at Mount Sinai. We have seen God’s heart expressed in His giving of the Law to Moses. We have seen God’s mighty acts over and over again on the nation’s behalf. The question as we move forward in the story is this: Will the people of Israel remain faithful and committed to God?