



Foundations

**Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes
and The Song of Solomon**

STUDY BOOKLET

The Poetry Books

In this study, we begin our survey of the five poetry books of the Old Testament, which are: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Solomon. The poetry books are also classified as "The Wisdom Books" or "The Writings", to distinguish them from the books of law, history, and prophets in the Old Testament.

The poetry books are included in the inspired Scriptures because poetry is the language of the heart. God knows the importance of what the Scriptures refer to as the heart of His people. In this part of the Bible, God speaks to the hearts of His people when they are suffering (Job), worshipping (Psalms), coping with the day-to-day stresses of marriage, family, parenting, and the marketplace (Proverbs), when they are doubting (Ecclesiastes), and when they are joyfully expressing the intimacies of the physical oneness between a husband and wife (Song of Solomon).

God demonstrates His vital concern for our hearts when He writes five of the books in this inspired, sacred library in poetry, the language of the heart. As we read these five poetry books, we should feel the finger of God pressing on our hearts - our inward man - insisting that we be genuine in our faith there, and that we be changed by our experience of God from the inside out. That is why God has given us five poetry books.

Chapter One

The Book of Job

According to the first of the poetry books, life is difficult and can be filled with overwhelming and perplexing suffering. The people of God have always suffered, and more believers have suffered and died for their faith since the end of World War II than in all the rest of church history. What may be the oldest book in the Bible tells us that pain and suffering are inevitable, but misery is optional. The Book of Job is the message of God to the hearts of His people when their hearts are hurting.

Most scholars agree that Job was written during the time of the patriarchs. We read that Job lived one hundred and forty years after he suffered and that he died "an old man and full of days." (Job 42:17) The length of his life parallels the ages of those we read about in the Book of Genesis.

The Literary Form of the Book of Job

The question of the literary form of the Book of Job is answered when we consider where this book is placed in the sacred library of Scripture. This book is one of the greatest poems ever written. The book of Job can be and indeed has been presented as a play. Think of this profound message of God to hurting hearts as a three-act play. When the curtain rises for Act One, the first scene gives us the setting for what may be the oldest story in the Bible.

Act One

The Setting

In the first scene of Act One, God and Satan are holding a conference regarding a man named Job. This first scene teaches us profound truth about the battle between good and evil. Evil is personified in Satan, who challenges the motives of this good man Job for being so good. God responds to this challenge with what theologians call "the permissive will of God". God permits evil to function within limits He sets by permitting Satan to take everything that Job has, including his ten children. Satan has made the accusation that Job is righteous because God has blessed his righteousness with great wealth. He has also declared that if God will permit him to take all Job's blessings away, Job will curse God.

As a result of God's permissive will, and the sinister devices of Satan, Job loses seven sons, three daughters, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, one thousand oxen, five hundred donkeys, and many servants.

Though the losses he endured overwhelmed him, Job did not curse or revile God in all this suffering. Job proclaimed: "Naked I came into this world and naked I will return. The Lord gave and the Lord took away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21,22) Confucius said, "We come into this world with our hands closed wanting everything, and we leave this world with our hands open, taking nothing." Job is telling us that his hands were open when he was born. All his possessions were placed in his hands by God, - and He never closed his hands. Those possessions were God's when He placed them there and they were God's to take any time God chose to take them.

Job passed this first test magnificently! We should make the observation that Job was partly wrong in saying that the

Lord had taken his children and all his possessions. We know, because we have been taken behind the scenes, that it was Satan who took all Job's possessions.

Observe how Job lost his possessions. He lost his ten children as the result of a sirocco, or desert storm that imploded the oldest son's house on them. He lost his sheep and his shepherds as the result of "fire from heaven", which would be lightning. Insurance companies call those events, "acts of God". We know that these were not acts of God, but acts of Satan, with the permission of God, but Job doesn't know that.

Satan and God have another conference about Job. God holds him up for a second time as the model of a righteous man. Again, Satan challenges the motives of Job for being righteous. He declares that Job will curse God if God permits him to afflict Job himself. God permits Satan to afflict Job himself - with only one limitation. He cannot take Job's life. You might say God permits Satan to torture Job because that is the definition of torture - inflicting as much suffering as possible without taking the life of your victim. Job is afflicted with a horrible disease. Scholars think it was something like elephantiasis, a form of cancer that turns your flesh the color of an elephant's hide and afflicts you with leprous running sores. Job suffers as much as a human being can suffer without dying.

Job does not handle this second round of testing as well. His wife suggests that he curse God and die. He responds: "Shall we indeed accept good from the hand of God and not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10) Essentially, Job was asking the question, "What should a righteous man expect God to put in his hand because he is righteous?"

The largest section of the Book of Job is introduced by this question Job asks his wife. Right before the curtain falls

at the conclusion of Act One, Job is visited by three wise old friends. (2:11) They have come together to comfort him. Like Job, they are men of mature age and they are considered to be wise and religious men. Today we would call them philosophers and theologians. They are so shocked at the physical appearance of Job that they sit with him in silence for seven days. (Later, Job will tell them this week of silence was their best grief therapy.) The curtain goes down on Act One with Job sitting in a circle of silence with his three friends.

Act Two

The Sharing

When the curtain rises for Act Two, we are introduced to Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. As they sit with Job in silent grief for the first seven days of their visit, they were model comforters because they simply comforted Job with their presence. When people suffer, the mere presence of a friend is often needed more than words.

However, Job's friends soon become comforters who bring no comfort when they begin to talk about Job's suffering. Job opens this act, which I call, "The Sharing" with a discourse in which he curses the day he was born and the night he was conceived. He does not curse God as Satan said he would. The pattern for this largest section of the book is that after Job gives his opening discourse, one of these friends will give a discourse that will be followed by a rebuttal discourse from Job. They move around the circle doing this nearly three times.

Eliphaz claimed that he had received a direct word from God, in a very subjective spiritual experience, that presented man at the mercy of God's justice. Through his direct revelation from God, he is able to tell Job with great authority

that his suffering is because he has sin in his life. (Job 4:12-21) Bildad concluded that Job was suffering and his children had died because of the sins of his children. (8:1-7) He also concluded that Job was a sinner. Zophar was an agnostic, and consistent with his agnosticism, he shared that man cannot know why he suffers, but said that contemplating it is an intelligent and pious thing to do. (11:7-12) He joins the chorus and agrees with his friends that the source of Job's suffering has to be sin in his life. All three of these "Comforters" exhort Job to repent.

In summary of all these discourses, Job and his friends addressed that question Job asked his wife, "What should a righteous man expect God to put in his hand because he is a righteous man?" They all agreed that God puts good things in the hand of a good man and the opposite in the hand of a wicked man. Their dilemma was that Job appeared to be a righteous man and God was obviously putting bad things in his hand. Their disagreement was very sharp and heated at times as they tried to resolve this dilemma.

All the way through these discourses Job's friends agreed that he had to be an unrighteous man. Since he appeared to be righteous, they all concurred that he must have secret sin in his life. One of them called Job a maggot and told him that God was punishing him far less than he deserved. Another believed it was sin in the lives of Job's children that moved God to take their lives and punish Job with his horrible suffering. They all exhorted Job to confess his sins and repent. You can easily see why their discourses did not comfort Job.

In his discourses, Job insisted that he was righteous. He was so dogmatic about his conviction that he was righteous that he actually questioned the righteousness of God for putting this suffering in his hand. This dialog ends when Job's comforters

conclude that they are never going to convince Job that he is a sinner.

Though Job's friends were spiritual and learned men, God later essentially told them, "You were wrong in what you said about Me, and you were wrong in what you said about My servant Job." (42:7-9) After Job speaks with God in a whirlwind, we hear Job, who insisted all the way through the dialog with his friends that he was righteous, say that he is vile. (40:4) As you read the discourses of Job's friends, remember that at the end of the book, God tells them that everything they said about Job was wrong and everything they said about Him was wrong. As you read Job's discourses, which are laced with his claims of personal righteousness, realize that at the end of the book, Job sees God and then loathes himself and repents in dust and ashes. Ask yourself "Why did Job loathe himself and of what did he repent?"

When we read that Job's friends decide they are never going to convince Job that his sin is the reason for his suffering, and when we read that the words of Job are ended, the curtain comes down on Act Two.

Act Three

The Solution

When the curtain rises on Act Three, Job and his friends are still seated in a circle but there is another man with them. His name is Elihu and he is much younger than Job and his friends. The young man speaks and explains that he has refrained from speaking because he is young and they are old. However, for two reasons, he has decided to speak. First, he realizes that wisdom comes from the Holy Spirit regardless of age. His second reason for speaking up is that he realizes they

are never going to resolve their dilemma because they are asking the wrong question.

The solution to the dilemma of Job's suffering is found in the discourse of Elihu and Job's response to that discourse. At the heart of his discourse, Elihu told Job to look up and see God's perspective on his suffering. According to this obviously inspired young man, that question Job asked his wife was the wrong question because it put Job's opened hand at the center of his suffering. Elihu replaced that wrong question with the right question: "Do you think it is according to justice for you to say, 'My righteousness is more than God's'? For you say, 'What advantage will it be to you? What profit will I have, more than if I had sinned?' I will answer you and your friends with you. Look up at the heavens and see; and behold the clouds - they are higher than you. If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against Him? And if your transgressions are many, what do you do to Him? If you are righteous, what do you give to Him, or what does He receive from your hand?" (Job 35:2-7)

To put your open hand at the center of your suffering and ask the question, "What is God going to put in my hand?" is the wrong question to ask and the wrong mindset to bring to our relationship with God. The chief end of man is to glorify God. That means that we should put God's open hand at the center of our suffering, and our lives, always asking the question, "What am I putting in the hand of God?"

Remember that the accusation of Satan was that Job was what we call today a utilitarian believer. Like those who followed Jesus for the loaves and fishes, Job had his hand open as he lived his righteous life. Earlier, I asked the questions, "Why did Job loathe himself when he saw God?" And, "Of what did Job repent when he saw God?" I believe Job realized, through the discourse of Elihu, that he was placing his own opened hand at

the center of his relationship with God. He was not aware of it until God used suffering to reveal it to him. It was when he saw that he was making a utility of God that he loathed himself and repented in dust and ashes.

Although Job had sharply disagreed with the discourses of his comforters, he does not disagree with this young man. He does what the young man exhorts him to do. He looks up, and when he does, he sees God in a whirlwind.

He and God dialog for some time and after his dialog with God, he exclaims: "Behold, I am vile; ... I lay my hand over my mouth. ... I will proceed no further." After more dialog with God, Job says: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I loathe myself and I repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6)

After the repentance of Job, God rebukes the friends of Job. When that happens, Job prays for his friends. When Job prays for his friends, God doubles all the possessions of Job. When the curtain goes down on Act Three, God has exactly doubled all the wealth of Job and he has seven more sons and three more daughters.

The Personal Application

This first of the five poetry books is God's inspired Word to hurting hearts. In a sense, this ancient saga of suffering may be viewed as a vivid illustration of one of the Beatitudes Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Matthew 5:4) Very often, a New Testament teaching is amplified and illustrated in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus gives us this great teaching in one sentence, but the book of Job applies that truth to a specific situation and teaches three steps we can take to

gain the comfort and the blessing Christ promised to those who mourn. Those three steps are:

Step one: let your mourning bring you to the place where, perhaps for the first time in your life, you ask the right questions. Observe how Job models this for us. As you read this book, observe how Job was driven by his suffering to ask questions like: "Does God see what is happening to me? If my only hope is the grave, then where is my hope? What is man that You test him and think so much of him? Why did God bring me out of the womb? Do I have the power to help myself? When a man dies, he is laid prostrate; he expires, and where is he? If a man dies, shall he live again?" (14:10,14) These are the kinds of questions God wants us to ask when we are suffering and mourning.

Step two: let your mourning bring you to the place where you listen to God's answers to the right questions. Job asked the question, "When a man dies, shall he live again?" God answered that question when He doubled the possessions of Job. Observe that God exactly doubled the livestock but He did not double, He only added seven sons and three daughters more when He doubled the other possessions of Job.

The explanation is that when the animals died, they were dead, but when the sons and daughters died, they still existed in the eternal state. To double Job's children, God only needed to give Job seven sons and three daughters more. From the perspective of eternity, Job has fourteen sons and six daughters. This is one way God answered that question of Job, "When a man dies, shall he live again?"

In the Scriptures, you will find many answers to that question, like the way God answers Job's questions, the Twenty-third Psalm, and in the New Testament where Jesus tells us He is the resurrection and the life, and that whoever believes in Him

will never die. (John 11:25,26) When you read the Scriptures you will find a great many beautiful answers of God to the right questions. Prayerfully look for them and then listen very carefully as God leads you to those beautiful answers to the right questions in His holy Word.

Step three: let your mourning bring you to the place that you believe God's answers to the right questions. When you ask the right questions, listen to God's answers to those questions, and believe God's answers to the right questions, you will discover the blessing and the comfort Jesus promised to those who mourn. The Bible calls that blessing and comfort, "Salvation."

Chapter Two

Thirty Biblical Reasons Why God's People Suffer

For millennia, the people of God have been asking the question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" The Book of Job is the most thorough and comprehensive answer to that question. But, the Book of Job is not the only answer you will find to that question in the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, you will find that the suffering of God's people is addressed in the Word of God. In this chapter, I will very briefly address thirty of those biblical explanations for suffering.

1. Suffering can teach us that God Himself is the source of all comfort. One thought gave Paul comfort when he endured a severe trial in Asia: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." (2

Corinthians 1:3). Suffering drove Paul to make the discovery that God was there for him and could comfort him. He challenges us to make that same discovery when we are suffering.

2. Suffering trains, equips, and prepares us to comfort others. Paul continued the thought he began in the passage referenced about by writing: "Who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (2 Corinthians 1:4) An evangelist is one beggar telling another beggar where the bread is. A qualified minister of comfort is one hurting heart telling another hurting heart where the comfort is. When we discover the comfort that can be found in God Himself, we become qualified ministers of comfort. Only those who have experienced the suffering that drove them to discover the comfort of God can tell other hurting hearts where the Comforter is.

3. Suffering drives us to seek God's wisdom. According to James, when our suffering brings us to the place that we simply don't know what to do we should ask God for the wisdom we do not have. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God... and it will be given to him." (James 1:5) James assures us that God will shower on us the wisdom we need.

4. Suffering leads us to spiritual maturity. James taught that suffering makes us "perfect and complete, lacking nothing." (James 1:4) The test of faith leads to the trust of faith. The trust of faith leads to the triumph of faith, or the "crown of life." (12)

5. Suffering gives us access to God's grace. When God gives us wisdom because we don't know what to do, we also need the grace of God that we might implement the wisdom God gives us. Paul wrote that: "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that you always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound unto every good work." (II Corinthians 9:8) All grace, all of you, always, all sufficiency, all things, abounding, all good works. No wonder that Paul tells us we should rejoice in the suffering that drives us to discover this treasure house of wisdom and grace.

6. Suffering produces spiritual character. Suffering produces a quality of character in us that will not run when things get difficult: "We rejoice in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint." (Romans 5:3-5a) These words like perseverance and proven character describe what we might call, "stay-ability". This is the character trait that hangs in there and hangs in there no matter how difficult things get. This is how an orange gets to be an orange. It hangs in there attached to the tree until it is an orange. Suffering can develop this very important dimension of spiritual character.

7. When we suffer in our youth, we gain strength for adulthood. Lamentations 3:27 teaches, "It is good for a man that he should bear the yoke in his youth." When young men and women are tried and tested, they develop a strength and stability they will need to endure trials when they are grown.

8. Suffering trains ministers of the Gospel. Paul wrote that suffering is the way we prove ourselves to be ministers of

God: "In all things approving ourselves us as ministers of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses." (2 Corinthians 6:4) God then desires that we respond "in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness", and we find the resources for that response "in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the Word of truth, in the power of God." (6, 7a) Suffering is the dynamic God uses to establish this "seminary" in which He trains ministers of the Gospel.

9. Suffering produces "miracle milestones" in our journeys of faith. When David prayed for deliverance in a time of great crisis (Psalms 3:1-6), he prayed with a proven faith and confidence because he had proven God's faithfulness in times of crises in his life before. Every time we prove that God is there for us in a time of crisis, we gain a "miracle landmark" that will strengthen and inspire our faith for present and future crises in our lives.

10. Suffering clears a path for God's salvation. Isaiah preached that the life of the Messiah would be a highway on which God would bring salvation into this world: "Let every valley be filled, and every mountain and hill be made low; let the crooked ways be made straight and the rough ways smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (Isaiah 40:4) The life of Jesus was a highway on which God and salvation traveled into this world. To be Christ-like means that we should be a highway on which God brings salvation into this world through us. God is able to bring salvation to others through our lives when our mountains of pride are leveled, our empty places are filled, our crooked sins are straightened, and our rough spots of suffering are made smooth.

11. Suffering showcases God's power. When Paul prayed that God would remove his thorn in the flesh, God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) Our weaknesses can be a showcase in which God exhibits His strength and power. This can be one explanation for the chronic fatigue that accompanies many kinds of suffering. Our disability can showcase His ability.

12. Our inadequacy can showcase God's adequacy. Suffering often makes us inadequate. Paul was made extremely weak by his thorn in the flesh. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10) But when we are weak, God is strong. When we are unable, He is able. God can use our suffering to teach us where our power ends and His power begins.

13. Suffering can be an opportunity to learn humility. Paul wrote that his thorn in the flesh was used "to keep (him) from exalting (himself)", because the phenomenal experiences he had, and the thorn was a messenger of Satan "to prick my pride." (2 Corinthians 12:7) Since we may be tempted to listen to the admiration when God uses us, and to rob God of the glory He deserves, God sometimes uses suffering to keep us humble.

14. Suffering experiences often lead to joyful experiences. In Psalm 126, we read: "Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting." (5) The tears we shed in our times of suffering are often "seeds" that will someday yield the fruit of joy. Though suffering lasts for a season, it produces joy in the harvest. Sometimes we must wait for the eternal state to experience the joyful shouting.

15. Suffering is sometimes a "cutback" that looks like a setback. Jesus taught that we are branches and He is a Vine. To bear fruit, we must continuously be in a relationship with Christ Who is our Vine the way a branch is related to a vine. To be fruitful we must also endure the painful pruning process, but being cut back results in a more fruitful and joyful life in Christ. (John 15:2; 11)

16. Suffering reveals Christ to the world. Paul wrote that when we are suffering, we are earthen vessels (little clay pots) that must endure our sufferings that we might reveal the precious Treasure of Christ, Who is like a great Light that shines out to this world through the cracks in our little clay pots. (2 Corinthians 4:7-10) While we are suffering, we are "afflicted in every way, but not crushed", as we reveal the glory of God's power in our mortal flesh.

17. Suffering can stimulate the growth of our inward man. The outward man is only temporal, but the inward man is eternal. "While our outward man decays, our inward man can be renewed day by day and prepared for the eternal state." (2. Corinthians 4:16) Our suffering is temporary, but the consequences of our suffering can be eternal. This is a marvelous concept to share with those who are suffering from a malignancy that is taking them into the eternal state.

18. Suffering can teach us eternal values. We are told that in the last days, the earth will shake until only those things with eternal value that cannot be shaken will remain. (Hebrews 12:25-29) Because our lives are temporal, and our values are often riveted to the temporal things of this world,

God sometimes uses suffering to lift up our eyes from those things that are temporal and fix our eyes on eternal values.

19. Suffering can refine us. Our God is a “consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:29) He sometimes uses suffering to burn out of our lives whatever is there contrary to His holy nature. This refining process that readies us for eternity can come in the form of suffering.

20. Suffering is sometimes the harvest of bad choices. We reap what we sow. If we sow corruption, we will reap corruption. A perverted mind leads to a perverted life. Sometimes, when we suffer, we are reaping a “banquet of consequences” because we have planted the wrong seeds in the garden of our lives. (Galatians 6:7,8)

21. Suffering confirms our identity as God’s children. God faithfully chastens those who are His authentic children. (Hebrews 12:4-11; John 1:12,13) He assumes a responsibility for His children that He does not apply to those who do not call Him Father and Lord. Because He is our Father and we are His children, He disciplines us when we sin.

22. Suffering sometimes means Christ desires our fellowship. The risen, living Christ is knocking on the hearts of those who are neither hot nor cold in their commitment to Him. This knocking represents His rebuke and chastisement because we are calling him Savior but we are not calling him Lord. (Revelation 3:19,20) He wills to access every meaningful area of our lives and fellowship with us there. This knocking of Christ can come in the form of suffering.

23. The "hog pens" often prompt the prodigals to return. Just as the prodigal son "came to his senses" when he suffered in the hog pen (Luke 15:17), so suffering in the "hog pens" of this world can bring us to our senses, lead us to repentance, and turn us with resolve back to the fellowship and values of the Father.

24. Suffering chastisement gives us a share in God's holiness. When our heavenly Father lovingly chastises us, we read that: "He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness." God is holy, and He wills that we be holy. He sometimes uses suffering to help us understand the importance of holiness in His character and in our character. (Hebrews 12:10)

25. We suffer because the world hates Christ and His followers. The Apostle Paul wrote "... those who decide to please Christ Jesus by living godly lives, will suffer at the hands of those who hate him." (II Tim. 3:12)

26. Suffering purifies our faith. Peter wrote that: "... if need be, for a season, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being far more precious than gold, though gold is purified by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the Revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6-7) Just as gold is purified by fire, our faith, which is far more valuable than gold, is purified by the "fire" of our suffering.

27. When we suffer, we are following the example of our Savior. Peter writes that we are called to follow "in His steps." (1 Peter 2:21) He suffered the agony of the cross for our salvation. He told us emphatically that we are to take up

our cross and follow His example (Luke 9:23-25; 14:25-35). We are following in His steps when we endure suffering for His sake.

28. Suffering sometimes opens the door to the kingdom of God. When Paul and Barnabas were persecuted on their missionary journeys, they encouraged other believers by saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22) Though we do not have to suffer to enter the kingdom, many are brought to faith through the door of tribulation.

29. We must all enter eternity through our death and resurrection. Jesus told a woman at a funeral that our two most unsolvable problems of sickness and death can be the gateway that leads to our living forever. (John 11:20-32) We can convert those two problems into our ticket home to heaven by believing that Jesus is the only solution to those problems. God cannot eliminate sickness and death, however, because that would rob us of our only way out of this world. This is another biblical explanation of why we must sometimes suffer.

30. The biblical philosophy of death. To establish his leadership authority, a shepherd often whacks sheep over the head with his staff to make them lie down. According to David, God becomes our Shepherd by making us lie down (Psalms 23:2). Once that relationship is in place, God leads us to still waters, green pastures, and a cup that runs over. When we get up again, those pastures turn brown, the waters become turbulent, and the cup empties.

Death is the Good Shepherd making us lie down in death so He can give us the green pastures that never turn brown, the still waters that never become turbulent, and the cup that never

empties. To give us these eternal values, we must experience those two unsolvable problems of sickness and death. This is the ultimate biblical explanation of why God's people must sometimes suffer.

The Word of God does have much to say to us about suffering, but there is still much suffering of God's people we do not understand. The word we use most in this life is the word, "Why?" The word we will use most in heaven is going to be the word, "Oh!" After we say, "Oh" for ten thousand years, we are going to start saying, "Hallelujah!"

Chapter Three

The Book of Psalms

The Book of Psalms addresses the hearts of the people of God when they are worshipping. The Psalms are one hundred and fifty inspired hymns that were sung by the Old Testament people of God. God gave His people the Psalms to help them express their love, praise, and prayers to God when they worship. These inspired hymns will draw you into the divine presence of God and help you express your love, praise, and prayer when you worship God today.

A Brief Perspective on the Psalms

Before the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the Book of Psalms was divided into five separate books: Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-90, 91-107, and 108-150. Seventy-three of the psalms are attributed to David, while Asaph is credited with twelve and the sons of Korah with eleven. Scholars believe

Hezekiah wrote ten psalms, and Moses, Ezra, and Solomon each wrote one. Many of the psalms are anonymous and were most likely written by Levites - ministers of music appointed by David - or David himself may be the author of some of these anonymous Psalms.

Musical Instructions

The inscriptions preceding the psalms often contain musical instructions, such as nehiloth, which indicates the accompaniment of wind instruments, or neginoth, which indicates stringed instruments. The word Selah, scattered throughout the psalms, means "pause and think reverently about that". It could have meant something like our musical rest means today. Some think it indicated a place for the musical instruments to play an interlude.

To Whom and about Whom

The ancient inspired hymn writer or a modern hymn writer is sometimes talking to God about God, which is praise; sometimes they are talking to God about man, in which case they are praying; or sometimes they are not talking to God at all. They are talking to man about God, which means they are preaching. When you read the words of each psalm, ask yourself, "To whom is the writer speaking, and about whom is the writer speaking?" Asking and answering that question will give you insight into the devotional message and application of the psalm you are reading.

Themes in the Book of Psalms

You will find four themes emphasized in the Psalms, the most common of which is the blessed man theme. This theme runs throughout the Psalms. A blessed man Psalm always explains that

the blessings of the blessed man are not an accident, or a coincidence, but a banquet of consequences that is the result of the faith and spiritual priorities of the Psalmist. You will find this theme demonstrated in Psalms: 1, 23, 32, 128, and many others.

The emotional theme is also evident in the psalms. These psalms address specific emotions and often show us the appropriate response to those emotions. Whatever emotional climate you may be experiencing when you read the Psalms, you will meet that emotional climate in the Psalms. If you are depressed, up tight with anxiety, loaded with guilt baggage or a broken heart, if you are overflowing with gratitude for your many blessings and you want to express grateful worship, whatever emotions you bring to your reading of the Psalms, will find psalms that address and show you what to do with those emotions.

NO ParagraphAlways observe what the hymn writer did about that emotional climate and then do the same with your emotions. Some of the emotional psalms are Psalms 3, 4, 32, 34, 51, and 55.

Worship is another definitive theme in the Psalms. In the worship psalms, the psalmist not only talks to God about God, but exhorts us to worship and also teaches us how to worship. Some of the worship psalms are Psalms 8, 63, 100, 103, and 107.

The psalmists also wrote as prophets on occasion, creating what we call Messianic Psalms. These psalms speak prophetically about the coming of the Messiah. David spoke prophetically about the first advent of Jesus Christ, and His resurrection, in Psalm 16. Peter preached from this Psalm on the Day of Pentecost. Other examples of Messianic Psalms are Psalms 2, 8, 46, 22, and 110.

The Historical Context of the Psalms

The historical setting for many of the psalms is often found in First and Second Samuel and in the Chronicles. David wrote half of the psalms, and his biography is found in those historical books. The content of David's psalms or the inscriptions that introduce them often indicate their historical setting. With that information, you can consult these historical books for background information. Learning this historical context for particular psalms will help you to interpret and apply them to your life.

Right in the middle of beautiful devotional content, some of the psalmists pray about their enemies. In these prayers, the psalmists often ask God to help them knock out the teeth of their enemies with their sword, or to beat their enemies to pieces with their weapon. This contradicts Christ's teaching to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

This is another reason it is important to have historical perspective when you read the Psalms. These ancient, inspired hymns were written in the time of the Law, which taught that it was appropriate to hate enemies, especially if they had offended the Lord. (Deuteronomy. 23:3-6) David, therefore, saw no contradiction when he prayed, "Do I not hate them that hate You? I hate them with a perfect hatred and with my sword I beat them into pieces like the dust of the earth." Historical perspective affirms that these prayers were appropriate when they were written.

The Twenty-third Psalm
"Sheep Talk"

The Shepherd Psalm of David is the favorite psalm and the favorite chapter of Scripture for millions of Jews, Catholics and Protestants. In this psalm, David was preaching because he was talking to man about his God. The literary form of the psalm is "sheep talk" because a sheep is speaking to other sheep about the greatness of his Shepherd:

"The Lord is my shepherd,

I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters.

He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil, for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

In addition to being a preachment psalm, the Twenty-third Psalm is a blessed man psalm. In all the blessed man psalms, the blessings of the blessed man are very conditional. In this psalm, some of David's blessings are green pastures, still

waters, and a cup that overflows. The condition on which those blessings are based is found in the opening words of the psalm: "The Lord is my Shepherd." All the blessings David profiles in this beautiful Shepherd song come into his experience of God when he can say that the Lord is his Shepherd.

The green pastures are a metaphor that pictures material blessings. When David tells us his cup "overflows" (5), he is using a metaphor that represents happiness. He is a happy man. What is the key to his happiness? The Lord is David's Shepherd. As long as the Lord is David's Shepherd, he has everything he needs - green pastures, still waters, a cup that is overflowing, a table of provision, etc. etc. But, all these blessings are conditional. They are all based on that relationship David has with his Shepherd. This psalm is really about the most important relationship in the world - our relationship with God.

The Relationship in Place

When we realize how very important that relationship is, we should then ask how that relationship can be established. The answer to our question is found in the second verse of the psalm: "He makes me to lie down." The shepherd establishes his leadership authority over sheep by hitting them over the head with his staff, by which he is telling them, "Lie down!" The Lord often becomes our Shepherd by hitting us over the head with a problem we cannot avoid or solve.

The Relationship in Practice

It is only after the Lord has become our Shepherd that He is able to lead us. Since sheep can only drink from water that is as still as glass, the still waters represent those places and situations that are suited for us. Our great Shepherd cannot lead us to those places until we lie down and confess two

propositions: that God is our Shepherd and that we are sheep. The next verses describe this relationship kept in place. This means we get up and play shepherd again and our relationship must be restored.

The Relationship in Perspective

When David puts this relationship in perspective, he gives us the most beautiful description in the Bible of the relationship between God and a human being. He tells us that no matter where his Shepherd leads him, he knows that his Shepherd will be with him, go before him, pursue behind him with unconditional love and goodness, provide for him, pour his blessing on him, and run his cup over within him. He also knows that this relationship will continue all the days of his life - and forever!

Apply the message of the Twenty-third Psalm to your own life. You may remember when you made the Lord your Shepherd. You grazed in green pastures beside the still waters, and your cup ran over with blessings. Has the grass turned brown or the cup become empty since that time? Have you wandered away from the still waters because you decided to shepherd your own life?

Realize that you need restoration. Allow God to put your relationship with Him in place, and keep it in place for His name's sake. Then live life knowing that your Shepherd is with you, goes before you, pursues behind you with His goodness and mercy, is spreading a table of provision for you, is blessing your life with His anointing oil, and is overflowing that cup of happiness within you. Live with the assurance that He can do this all the days of your life, and face eternity with unquenchable optimism, knowing that He can do this forever!

Psalm One
The Blessed Man

Psalm One is the definitive blessed-man psalm. All the other blessed-man psalms follow the general pattern of Psalm One, and show us that the blessed man and his blessings are not by chance or coincidence, but are the result of his very deliberate convictions and choices. The first of the psalms reads:

*"Blessed is the man
Who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly,
Or stand in the way of sinners,
Or sit in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season.
Its leaf also does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he himself shall prosper.
The wicked are not so,
But they are like chaff, which the wind drives away.
Therefore, the ungodly will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly will perish."*

Who Is the Blessed Man?

Psalm One presents two men - the blessed man and the ungodly man. This psalm uses a form of Hebrew poetry that states a positive truth by making a negative statement. David gives us a profile of who the blessed man is by presenting a

profile of who he is not. For example, the blessed man “Does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly” (1a), which means that he walks in the counsel of God. He finds God’s counsel in the Word of God, on which “He meditates day and night.” (2b)

Also, the blessed man does not “sit in the seat of scoffers.” (1c) This negative statement tells us that the blessed man sits in the seat of the believer – he is a believing man. He believes in the Word of God, and “His delight is in the law of the Lord.” (2a) He knows that the key to making the Word of God a powerful force in his life is that he obeys the Word of God. He walks in the counsels of God he finds in the Word of God.

This psalm was written by David, who was the second king of Israel, and the best king Israel ever had. According to the law of Moses, it was the king’s duty to diligently copy the law and make it his constant companion: “It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes.” (Deuteronomy 17:19) Based on the first psalm we read in this inspired hymnbook, we can assume that this discipline caused David to love the Word of God, and this love for God’s Word made him a blessed man.

What are the blessings of the Blessed Man? After describing the convictions and choices that are the conditions that lead to the blessings of the blessed man, David lists his blessings:

Stability

The blessed man is “like a tree firmly planted by streams of water” (3a), where the soil is moist and the root systems are vast and run deep. Its underground root systems spread far in every direction. If several tons of truck crashes into a large oak tree, the vehicle is demolished, and the tree does not move

an inch. It is this kind of stability - the stability of a well-planted and well-nourished tree - that profiles the stability of the blessed man. Jesus said the same thing when He profiled the man who hears and applies His teachings (Matthew 7:24, 25).

Fertility

The blessed man is fruitful - the tree that profiles his life yields its fruit in its season (3b). This means that in all the seasons of his life he brings forth the fruit that is appropriate for that season of life. Because he is a believer and loves the Word of God, his knowledge of God extends beyond the sacred page and into a relationship with the living Word. This relationship is the key to his fruitfulness. Jesus taught that we must abide in Him as a branch is aligned with a vine if we want to be fruitful.

Longevity

The blessed man does not become a bitter, withered old man in his senior years. We read that, "His leaf shall not wither." He reminds us of the words of the poet who wrote: "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be. The last of life for which the first was made." Every day that he lives prepares him for every other day that he lives. His quality of life gets better and better as years are added to his life.

Prosperity

We also read that "in whatever he does, (the blessed man) prospers." (3d) David was not referring here to material prosperity but spiritual prosperity. Because the poetry books focus on the inward man rather than the outward man, we may assume that the blessed man's prosperity is the prosperity of

his inward man and affects the quality of his eternity. Anything we will leave behind when we exit this world is not worth living for while we are in this world.

Security

The last of the blessed man's blessings is also stated negatively: "The ungodly will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous." (5) The blessed man has security in this life and the next because he walks according to the counsel of God he finds in the Word of God. He will stand on the finished work of Christ in the judgment and he will join the congregation of the righteous for all eternity because he does. Like the blessings profiled in the Shepherd Psalm, the blessings of the blessed man in Psalm One are "all the days of his life and forever!"

Two Men in a Pew, Which One Are You?

David describes the ungodly man by simply writing, "The ungodly are not so." (4a) The ungodly do not believe as the blessed man believes. The ungodly do not delight in God's Word, nor do they meditate upon it day and night. As a result, they do not have stability, fertility, longevity, prosperity, or security, and they will not experience eternity the way the blessed man will experience it.

Why is the blessed man blessed? Because of the choices he makes. He chooses to believe and meditate on God's Word, and he chooses to remove himself from the ungodly and their fruitless ways. His blessings are a banquet of consequences.

The challenge of every blessed man psalm poses this question: "Two men in a pew, which one are you?" By the grace of God, are you the blessed man? Do you sit in the seat of the believer? Do you believe the Word of God? Do you meditate upon

it day and night? Do you walk by the counsel it gives you? According to Psalm One, that is the key to the blessings of the blessed man.

Psalm One Hundred Twenty-eight
Blessed Is Everyone?

*"How blessed is everyone who fears the Lord,
Who walks in His ways.
When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands,
You will be happy and it will be well with you.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine
Within your house,
Your children like olive plants
Around your table.
Behold, for thus shall the man be blessed
Who fears the Lord.
The Lord bless you from Zion,
And may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of
your life.
Indeed, may you see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel!"*

Is Everyone Blessed?

Many people like to put a period after the fourth word of this psalm because they believe that everyone is blessed. However, the Scriptures tell us that the blessings of the blessed man are conditional: "Blessed is everyone *who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.*" (1) As we've been learning, the blessed man is blessed because of his faith convictions and his deliberate choices.

This psalm teaches that everyone who fears the Lord is blessed, but this raises another question: Didn't the book of Job teach that God doesn't always bless good people? When Job's friends told Job that God punishes those who sin and blesses those who do not sin, God told them they were wrong. However, we can learn from the blessed man psalms that the blessed man generally does reap what he sows, and when godly people like Job suffer, they are the exception and not the rule.

God's Strategy

Psalm 128 teaches that the blessed man and his blessings fit into God's strategy to impact the world. As we learned from the Book of Job, the appropriate response to our blessedness is not "Lord, what are You going to give me?" but "Lord, how does my being a blessed man benefit You?"

God's strategy follows a pattern. He finds a man who will believe and obey Him, and He chooses to bless him (1-2). The blessing of God then passes through the man to his wife, and his wife becomes like a fruitful vine in his house (3a). Then the blessing passes through the man and his fruitful wife to their children, whom we read become "like olive plants around (their) table." (3b) The olive plant is a symbol of fruitfulness.

God's blessing passes through the family unit to bless Zion, which was the spiritual community in the Old Testament. Through the spiritual community (Zion), the blessing of God on this family unit impacts the city (Jerusalem), the nation (Israel), and ultimately the world. This psalm essentially teaches that God's uses the family unit to tell the world about Himself. When He wants to impact the city, the country, and the world, He begins with a blessed man and a blessed family.

Psalm One Hundred Twenty-seven
Providential Priorities

*"Unless the Lord builds the house,
They labor in vain who build it;
Unless the Lord guards the city,
The watchmen keeps awake in vain.
It is vain for you to rise up early,
To retire late,
To eat the bread of painful labors;
For He gives to His beloved in his sleep.
Behold, children are a gift of the Lord,
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one's youth.
How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;
They will not be ashamed
When they speak with their enemies in the gate."*

This short psalm, which should be considered as a companion with Psalm 128, is the only psalm written by Solomon. Since he was a great builder, we might expect him to use a building metaphor in his psalm. He built the temple that is named for him; he built entire cities, parks, stables and a fleet of ships. However, Solomon tells us that it is possible to build in vain: "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it." (1) He tells us it is possible to worry, labor and build in vain, because it is possible to worry, labor, and build the wrong things.

This psalm is similar to Solomon's last words of wisdom confession in Ecclesiastes, in which he preached that much of

what he did in his life was in vain. When he shifts from his building metaphor to a beautiful metaphor about children, he is telling parents that the most important thing they ever do is when they build the lives of their children. Solomon may be telling us that he wished he had spent time building the lives of his children instead of all those other things he built.

Solomon tells us: "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth." (v. 4) The arrows in this metaphor are your children and you are the bow. The thrust and direction with which your children go out into this world are determined by the bow that sends them out into the world. That bow is your home.

The essential message of this psalm is found in its opening statement: "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it." There are many things that only God can do. Only God can create new life in your children. Only God can give them the gift of faith. In some ways, God cannot build your child's life until you let Him do it. This truth is wrapped in a beautiful metaphor. Solomon tells us, "He gives to His beloved in his sleep." As long as we are awake, God cannot put new energy in our bodies. But, when we become passive and go to sleep, God becomes active and puts new life in our bodies. Apply that metaphor to the responsibilities and challenges of being a parent.

What Does This Mean?

It is possible to worry, labor, and build in vain because we have the wrong priorities. This psalm is challenging us to invest ourselves in our children because it is through the family unit that God impacts the world. We must dedicate ourselves to these priorities because the Devil knows God uses the family unit to impact the world. The epidemic breakdown of

marriage and family today bear witness to the tragic reality that he is determined to sabotage this vital work of God by cutting the strings of our bows.

Is everyone blessed? Not according to what we've learned in the blessed man psalms. Only the believing and obedient man or woman is blessed, and their blessings impact this world through their children. Are you that man or woman? Consider the conditions of the blessed man and his blessings and then answer this question: "Two men in a pew; which one are you?"

Psalm Four
Solutions to Stress

Having considered several blessed man psalms, we are now ready to consider some of what I call the emotional psalms. These psalms are often prayer psalms, where the psalmist is talking to God about man - usually himself. One such psalm is Psalm Four:

"Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!

You have relieved (enlarged) me in my distress;

Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.

O sons of men, how long will my honor become a reproach?

How long will you love what is worthless and aim at deception?

"But know that the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself;

The Lord hears when I call to Him.

Tremble, and do not sin;

*Meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still.
Offer the sacrifices of righteousness,
And put your trust in the Lord.*

*"Many are saying, "Who will show us any good?"
Lift up the light of Your countenance upon us, O Lord!
You have put gladness in my heart,
More than when their grain and new wine abound.
In peace I will both lie down and sleep,
For You alone, O Lord, make me to dwell in safety."*

How Should We Respond to Stress?

The emotional climate of the author of Psalm 4 is distress. If you drop the first two letters of the word distress, you realize this psalmist is addressing the problem of stress. The stressed out world in which we live today has been labeled, "The Age of Anxiety." This psalm shows us how to cope with the stresses we face every day.

Prayer

In Psalm 4, David responded to his emotional pressures through prayer. He prayed: "Answer me when I call, Oh God of my righteousness." (1) Prayer is a conversation with God. Conversation has two dimensions - talking and listening. God wants you to talk to Him, but He also wants to speak to you. In most of the prayer psalms, we first see the psalmist talk to God, and then we hear God's response. The psalmist petitions God and then receives the assurance that God has heard his prayer because He answers his prayer.

David began this prayer telling God the source of his distress (2). God responded by giving David a revelation: "But know that the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself; the

Lord hears when I call to Him. Tremble, and do not sin.” (3, 4a) When God answers our prayers we should never be same people again. Think about what an answered prayer means. It means that the God of the universe is interested in us, hears, and answers us when we have a conversation with Him. Once we have experienced an answered prayer, for us, life should never be the same again.

Examine Your Heart

When God spoke to David, He told him to do something: “Meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still.” (4b) When God told David to be still, He was telling him to listen to Him. There is a sense in which when He told David to “meditate in (his) heart upon his bed,” He was telling David to talk to himself. He wanted David to examine his heart, or have a little board meeting with himself.

Do the Right Thing

As David examined his heart, God showed him what to do about his stress. God made David know that he was to, “Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put his trust in the Lord.” (5) Why did he need to do this? Because many were watching and asking, “Who will show us any good?” (6a) People were watching David. They were learning about God from David’s example.

We can assume that David was facing a decision that involved a choice. He could do the expedient thing and survive. Or, he could do the right thing. If he did what was right, he believed he could not survive his crisis. Since he was a man of integrity, he could not live with the guilt of doing what is expedient. When he had his conversation with God, he resolved to make whatever sacrifices he had to make to do the right thing. He knew that people are looking for something good,

meaning, somebody who does what is right even though it involved great sacrifices.

When David resolved that he was going to offer sacrifices of righteousness he experienced an emotional transformation. He said, "You have put gladness in my heart ... In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You alone, Oh Lord, make me to dwell in safety." (7a, 8)

If you meet your emotional climate in David's distress, meditate in your own heart and have a conversation with God. If your anxiety can be traced to a spiritual conflict over what is expedient and what is right, resolve in your heart to offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and to place your trust in God. Prove that David's solution for stress can change your emotions of moral tension, unrest, and fear, into an emotional climate of the rest that comes from trust, peace, and a good night's sleep.

Psalm One Hundred Thirty-nine
The Almighty Counselor

"Search me, Oh God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalms 139:23,24)

Another example of a prayer psalm, where the inspired hymn writer is talking to God about man, is the great prayer of David in Psalm One Hundred Thirty-nine. In this psalm, we find God to be the great Counselor of David. When God told Saul through Samuel that He had found a replacement for the first king of Israel, God described David as a man after His own heart, who would do all the will of his God. Because David wanted to walk in the will of God for his life, he prayed this beautiful prayer to God. The essence of the prayer is actually prayed in the last two verses. If we divide the rest of the psalm into

paragraphs, each paragraph will show us Who the God is to Whom David prays this prayer - and why David is addressing his prayer to this God. When David prayed this prayer, there were many gods and idols to whom prayers were addressed.

In a first paragraph (1-5), David tells us that he is praying to a God Who knows him. God's knowledge of David is unlimited. David prayed: "Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me." (1) You may say that you know a famous person, perhaps even the political leader of your country. However, would it not be more impressive if that famous person said publicly that he knows you? David is impressed with the glorious reality that the God of the universe knows him!

When you seek human counsel, their understanding of your situation is limited to how much you tell them about yourself. No matter how qualified they may be, their ability to help you is limited by how much you tell them about your social history and your present crisis. But God knows you completely. He knows your thoughts before you think them, and He is "intimately acquainted with all (your) ways." (3b)

A second paragraph (6-12), shows us that David is addressing his prayer to the true and living God from Whom he cannot escape. David prays: "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?" How fast would you have to travel to flee from the presence of God? How far would you have to go? How high and how low do you have to travel to escape, evade or ignore God? David is addressing his prayer to the omnipresent God from Whom he cannot escape.

A third paragraph (13-16), shows that David is praying to the God Who made him. David addressed God by saying, "You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb... In our book were written all the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them." (13, 16b) Before we existed,

God had scheduled all our days in a book. Think about that when you schedule your days, weeks and months on your calendar for a year. This also means that there is no such thing as a human accident. We all exist by providential design. Think about that when you are considering an abortion.

A fourth paragraph (17,18), shows that David is addressing his prayer to the God Who thinks about him. We learn from David that God's thoughts of us are precious and that they are without number, or infinite (17). One of the most touching expressions of intimacy is to tell a loved one that you think about them often. God thinks about us more than we think about ourselves.

Finally, David addresses his prayer to the God Who protects him (19-22). It is in this context that he asks God to slay his enemies. He prays his prayer for protection with great confidence that God will help him slay his enemies.

Having established this profile of the God to Whom he is praying, David prays the essence of his prayer when he asks God to "search" him and "know" him and to see if there is any wicked way in him (23, 24). He makes this request of the God from Whom he cannot escape, to the God Who knows him, made him, thinks about him, and Who will protect him.

This is the God to Whom we address all our prayers. When you are unsure about the motives in your heart, but want to walk in the everlasting way of the will of God for your life, approach the throne of the Great Counselor to Whom David prayed. Ask Him to take the lid off your heart and show you the motives that should not be in your heart. Ask Him to take the lid off your mind and show you the thoughts that should not be there because you want to walk in the everlasting way of His perfect will for your life.

Psalm One Hundred

*"Make a joyful shout to the Lord, all you lands!
Serve the Lord with gladness;
Come before His presence with singing.
Know that the Lord He is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.
Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,
And into His courts with praise:
Be thankful unto Him, and bless His name.
For the Lord is good;
His mercy is everlasting;
And His truth endures, to all generations."*

Psalm One Hundred is the definitive worship psalm. It tells us what worship is. Worship is coming before the presence of God. There is such a thing as the divine presence of God, and coming before that divine presence is the essence of worship. In this psalm of David, he not only defines worship for us, but through the use of a metaphor, he also shows us how to worship.

In Old Testament times, there was a specific protocol to follow when a person had an appointment with a king. The first thing they would do was to enter the elaborate gates of the palace of the king. If the king was a great king, the visitor would then proceed down many long corridors, each lined with soldiers on both sides, before walking through two massive doors that would finally usher the visitor into the presence of the king.

As a king, David was very familiar with this protocol. He chose that protocol as a metaphor to illustrate his definition

of worship and the “how to” of worship. According to David, worship is coming before the presence of God.

Coming before the presence of God should begin with “the gates of thanksgiving.” (4a) We should begin our worship experience by thanking God for all our blessings. Thanksgiving gives birth to worship. A grateful heart is the “gate” that leads us into the presence of God.

David fleshes out his metaphor when he writes that the gates of thanksgiving lead into the courts of praise (4b). When we begin our experience of worship with thanksgiving, we soon find ourselves praising God. We move from thanking God for our many blessings to talking to God about God and praising Him for who He is. As we pass through the “Gates of Thanksgiving,” our focus is on the hand of God from which we receive so much. But as we enter into the courts of praise our focus becomes the face of God.

For centuries, great old souls have told us the door that leads into the presence of God is the door of praise. In David’s inspired metaphor, the door that leads into the divine presence of God is singing. David writes: “Come before His presence with singing.” (2b) It was David who brought music and worship together. He had four thousand Levites who did nothing but praise the Lord with instruments David himself made for that purpose (I Chronicles 23:5).

There are times in this life when we have a need to express the inexpressible. That is why lovers give each other ridiculous nicknames that embarrass them later. They are trying to express their inexpressible love for each other. That need is never greater than when we are in the divine presence of God. God has given us the miracle of music to express our inexpressible worship in His divine presence. According to David, it is music that opens the door into the presence of God.

When we come into the presence of God, we can come to know by experience things that we have only known intellectually. First, we know absolutely that He is God. When we worship, we acknowledge that the Lord is God and that we are only the sheep of His pasture (3). This may be what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote that, "No man can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit." (I Corinthians 12:3)

Then we know experientially that "The Lord is good." We often resist committing ourselves wholly to God because instead of confessing, "The Lord is good," we say by our actions, "The Lord is terrible." This psalm says, that in the presence of God we not only know that the Lord is God, we know that "The Lord is good." (5a) God's will for us is good, because He, Himself, is good.

In His presence, we also know that He wants people in every generation in all the lands of the earth to come into His presence and know what we now know. The first verse of this psalm ends with the words, "all you lands," or, "all the earth." The last verse ends with the two words, "all generations." (5c) Those who worship in the presence of God know that God desires people to know Him. The Bible and church history are filled with stories of people who had a meaningful experience of coming to God that led to a fruitful going for God.

This pattern of the experience of worship is stated in the second sentence of the psalm when we are exhorted to "serve the Lord with gladness." When we truly worship God, we serve Him with gladness, not because it is our duty to serve Him. In this worship psalm, we have learned what worship is, how to worship, what should happen to us when we worship, and the results of a genuine experience of worship.

Psalm Thirty-four
A Prescription for Failures

Psalm 34 is one of the emotional or prayer psalms even though this psalm is also a worship and a preaching psalm. The inscription at the beginning of Psalm 34 gives you some historical perspective into the psalm. This psalm represents a dark chapter early in David's life when David fled from Saul and became a fugitive. That dark chapter in David's life is described in I Samuel 21 and 22. When David fled from Saul and became Public Enemy Number One, for his own protection and survival, David actually considered joining forces with a Philistine king. When that failed, David became a fugitive and lived in caves and in the wilderness. We then read that David was joined in the wilderness by those who were in distress, in debt, and discontented (I Samuel 22:2). To be in debt in ancient cultures meant that you were in danger of debtor's prison, as illustrated in the parable of Jesus in the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. It is intriguing to realize that this was David's first meeting with the men who would later be described as "the mighty men of David."

Psalm 34 is an example/summary of what David preached to those fugitives and failures, who became mighty men, because they understood and believed the essence of what David preached to them. David's prescription for failures can be summarized as, "Three men in a pew, which one are you?"

The Hopeful Man

The man who still has hope believes there is something good in this life and that he is going to find it. God plants hope in every human heart. God plants hope in our hearts because

hope can lead us to faith. That is why the faith chapter of the Bible begins by telling us that faith gives substance to the things for which we hope. It is faith that leads us to God.

In America there are between 25,000 and 30,000 suicides every year. When psychiatrists and psychologists are pressed for an explanation as to the cause of these suicides, one of their answers is that people commit suicide because they lose hope. When people no longer believe that something good is going to happen to them, they commit suicide.

While it is tragic that twenty-five to thirty thousand people lose hope in America every year, is it not amazing to realize that 250 million people in America have hope? We have hope because we are born with hope in our hearts. The intent of God is that the hope He plants in our hearts should lead us to faith, and it is the plan of God that our faith should lead us to a relationship with Him.

According to the Apostle Paul, the three great lasting qualities in life are hope, faith, and love (I Corinthians 13:13). Love is the greatest of these qualities because love is not something that leads us to something that leads us to God. When we experience the kind of love Paul is describing, we are there. The familiar words, "God is love" mean that there is a quality of love that is God.

The Hopeless Man (34:16, 21)

There is such a thing as a hopeless man. The man who is trying to move against God is hopeless. If God is for you, who can be against you? But, If God is against you, who can be for you? The apostle Paul was agreeing with the old rabbis, like Gamaliel, when he wrote, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" The converse of that is also true: "If God is against us, who can be for us?" (Romans 8:31; Acts 5:34-40). The man who is

moving against God is moving in a direction that makes his life hopeless. David expresses this truth when he writes: "The face of the Lord is against those who do evil ... Evil shall slay the wicked." (16, 21)

The Happy (Blessed) Man (34:15,17-20,22)

Experience and observation will focus the happiness and positive consequences of the godly man and the negative consequences and unhappiness of the ungodly man. That observation is generally true in this life. The Book of Job and many other Scriptures will caution you: "Never say always" and "never say never!" (Consult: "Thirty Biblical Reasons Why God's People Suffer" which is a supplement to the commentary on the Book of Job in this booklet.) In the eternal state, David's observation will always be true (Psalms 73)!

The Happening (34:3-8)

David tells these fugitives and failures his own personal experience of how he progressed from the hopeless, to the hopeful, and then to the happy man. Observe these personal statements of David: "I sought the Lord ... He heard me ... He delivered me from all my fears ... This poor man cried! ... The Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles." This is David's personal witness of his conversion experience.

David's Prescription for Failures

"Taste and see that the Lord is good," then discover that the man who trusts in God is blessed. (8) Through a personal conversion experience, discover that the Lord is the Good you hoped to experience in this life.

The Covenant Between David and His Mighty Men

"Oh magnify the Lord with me. Let us exalt His name together" (3). This covenant is a beautiful description of spiritual community. This is the kind of preaching that produced the mighty men of David. Never forget that the mighty men of David were fugitives and failures when David met them. These mighty men were in debt, distressed, and discontent when David met them.

In the mighty men of David you see again the truth that was illustrated in the lives of people like Moses, all the judges, and David himself. That truth is that God delights to do extraordinary things through very ordinary people. A psalm like Psalm 34 and the whole phenomenon of the mighty men of David flesh out what I have called four spiritual secrets. Those secrets are: I am not, but God is, and He is with me.

I cannot, but God can, and He is with me.

I do not want to, but God wants to, and He is with me.

I did not, but God did because He was with me.

Psalm Forty-six

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. ... There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; ... Cease striving (be still), and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold." (Psalm 46:1-5,10,11)

To the Sons of Korah, the ancient psalmists who wrote this psalm, the concept of a mountain collapsing into the sea was a shocking metaphor of the unthinkable. The heart of the devotional message of these Levite brothers is, that when our literal or personal world is falling apart, we need to be still long enough to know that God is - and what God wills (10). All over the world, people watched the twin towers of the World Trade Center in America implode. That was a modern example of a metaphor of the unthinkable. That was our mountain slipping into the heart of the sea.

We need to focus on the reality that in this world, there are temporal values and there are eternal values. The metaphor of the ancient hymn writers for this concept of eternal and temporal values existing, side by side, is a river flowing through this self-destructing, material and temporal world, and that river cannot be moved (destroyed). God is in the midst of this river, which flows through this world and brings great joy as it flows into the eternal city of God. This river could represent the people of God, who have eternal life because they are related to their eternal God. The aged Apostle John described the people of God this way: "The man who is following God's will is part of the permanent and cannot die." (I John 2:17)

The fact that this river cannot be moved means this river could also represent the eternal values that flow through this material and temporal world. These psalmists are telling us, that when our world is literally or figuratively falling apart, we need to be still long enough to focus on the reality that God is, and anything related to God is, *forever!*

We are told in the New Testament that we cannot come to God and we cannot please God unless, or until we believe that God is (Hebrews 11:6). According to this great Psalm, when our world

is falling apart, after we have affirmed the great reality that God is, we also need to be still long enough to know what the will of God is. God wills to be exalted among the nations and God wills to be exalted in the earth. Psalm Forty-six tells us, that in a time of calamity, we need to be still and know that God has a will about our world - and about our personal lives.

This Psalm has many more words of comfort and spiritual perspective for us when our literal or personal world is self-destructing. If you check the marginal alternate readings in The New American Standard Bible, you will discover that these ancient psalmists were telling us that our God is "abundantly available to help us in our tight places." When they told us to be still and know that God is, and what the will of God is, they actually wrote: "Relax, cease striving, let go, and know (by experience and relationship), that I am, and that I am everything my Word says I am. Also know that I am with you in your time of calamity, and I have a will about the way you should respond to your chaotic circumstances."

When God's people suffer the loss of their earthly possessions through natural disasters, like an earthquake, a flood, a fire, or through man-made disasters like war, even though there isn't anything good about these tragedies, God sometimes uses these calamities to teach His people the difference between treasures in heaven and treasures on earth. Jesus taught us to lay up treasures in heaven because treasures on earth depreciate and thieves can steal them from us (Matthew 6:19-21).

This is also considered to be a prophetic psalm because it presents metaphorically what the prophets and apostles call, "the Day of the Lord." When prophets predict an event, they sometimes present that event as if it has already happened. This is called "the prophetic perfect tense." The authors of

this psalm present the Day of the Lord as if it has already happened, and they are taking us on a tour of the devastation, the way a governor or a head of state would fly over a natural disaster to assess the damage. In that context, the opening and closing verses are repeated, and we are challenged to be still and know that God is, and what the will of God is (1, 10, 11). All the Scriptures that tell us about the Day of the Lord, emphasize the application, "What manner of persons ought we to be, seeing that all these (material) things are going to be destroyed?" (II Pet. 3:10,11)

When the two towers of the World Trade Center imploded in America, in addition to the tragic loss of thousands of lives, a landmark that represented the earthly values of millions of people was totally destroyed. God has nothing to do with terrorism, and there isn't anything good about the tragedies we suffer at the hands of evil people. However, God sometimes uses catastrophe as a wake-up call to shock His people into a spiritual and eternal value system. That is the essence of the message of this great psalm written by the sons of Korah.

Chapter Four

The Book of Proverbs

When you transact business there are two things to be gained - money and experience. When godly people do business in this world, the secular people often get the money and God's people get the experience. God gave us the Book of Proverbs so that we will not go through life learning everything by experience.

The Book of Proverbs is the most practical book in the Bible. Solomon wrote three thousand proverbs (I Kings 4:29-34). He shares nearly one thousand of his proverbs with us in this inspired book of the Bible. He was considered to be the wisest man who ever lived. In the Book of Proverbs he and the wisest people of his day, show us how to live in all the practical areas of our lives.

Solomon also wrote more than one thousand songs. In the Book of Proverbs, we find less than one thousand of his proverbs, and only one of his songs is included in the Bible, the Song of Solomon. Solomon did not write all of the proverbs contained in the Book of Proverbs. He compiled wise sayings that were written by other wise men, and other wise men compiled some of the proverbs of Solomon that we find in this book.

The first nine chapters clearly state the purpose of the book, which is to teach wisdom. Solomon's proverbs are found in chapter 10:1 to chapter 22:16. The proverbs of the wise are found in 22:17-24:34, and the proverbs of Solomon that Hezekiah's wise men compiled make up chapters 25-29. Chapter 30 contains the proverbs of Agur, and chapter 31 contains the proverbs of King Lemuel, which he received from his mother. Chapters 1-10 are written to young men; 11-20 to all men; and 21-31 to the rulers of men.

Though Solomon was known as the wisest man who ever lived (I Kings 4:31), He was also, in many ways, the greatest failure who ever lived. As I observed in our survey of the history books, the divided kingdom and the captivities are a consequence of the sin of Solomon, rather than the sin of his father David. How could a man who was such a failure teach God's people how to live?

There are several answers to that question. The wisdom of these proverbs does not depend on whether or not the author

applied them to his own life; they present inspired wisdom from God. Also, these proverbs, Psalm 127, and the Book of Ecclesiastes, were written by Solomon to teach young men not to do as he did. He learned much from his mistakes, and he wanted to pass his hard-learned wisdom on to others, especially young men.

As Solomon states the purpose of these Proverbs, he writes: "I would have you learn this great fact: that a life of doing right is the wisest life there is. ... That is why you must eat the bitter fruit of having your own way and experience the full terrors of the pathway you have chosen. ... For the reverence and fear of God are basic to all wisdom. Knowing God results in every other kind of understanding. (4:11; 1:31; 9:10)

In some ways, this mission objective of Solomon is a summary of his own experience of life. He knew he had failed but wanted us to know that we learn wisdom through failure and its consequences. One of the most effective ways to learn is to learn by reaction to the consequences of our foolish and sinful choices. When we experience the full terrors of the pathways we choose, we pay a steep price to gain valuable wisdom and we prove by experience that "A life of doing right is the wisest life there is."

When God tells us that something is right, He is telling us that because He loves us. He wants us to do what is right because He knows that the consequences of doing right are good. When God declares something to be wrong, He makes that declaration because He knows the consequences of doing wrong are not good.

Warnings Regarding Seductive Women

Proverbs 5:15-19 is addressed to young men and warns them about the temptations of seductive women. These verses teach

that the best defense against immorality is a strong offense—a good marriage. Young men should be ravished with their wife's love at all times. Solomon writes to young men: "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth" (18), so that when they enter the world, they will not be vulnerable to the charms of seductive women. They will be less vulnerable because their sexual needs will have already been met. Solomon's warning to the man who gives in to immorality is: "He will be held in the cords of his sin. He will die for lack of instruction, and in the greatness of his folly he will go astray." (22b-23)

Self Discipline

To teach about the importance of self-discipline, Solomon said, "Go to the ant, Oh sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer and gathers her provision in the harvest." (6:6-7) When we are young, our parents and teachers hover over us, show us what is expected of us and hold us accountable. When we become mature, however, we are expected to supervise ourselves and be self-disciplined. According to Solomon, we can learn self-discipline from the ant, which without supervision, makes provision in the summertime and harvest for the whole year.

Giving and Receiving

There is a teaching from this Book of Proverbs that parallels the teachings of Jesus (11:24-25). It reads: "There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want. The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered." This proverb teaches that our souls are nourished when we are generous, and they are malnourished

when we are selfish. If we hold on to everything we have, we can lose everything, but if we give it away generously, we become richer. Jesus presented this same principle when He taught that we must lose our lives to gain them forever (Matthew 16:24-27; Acts 20:35). According to Jesus, if you really want to find your life, then you must deliberately lose it, pour it out, or sacrifice your life for God and other people.

You can expect to glean wisdom from the book of Proverbs because it is a book of wise sayings. Remember that Solomon's purpose in compiling these proverbs was so that the wise might become wise leaders, the simple-minded might become wise, and that people would discern how to live right.

Since there are thirty or thirty-one days in a month, young men should use this book as a calendar and read the chapter of Proverbs that corresponds to the day of the month. I recommend that you make a chart of a dozen or more vertical columns. Across the top of the chart, at the top of those columns, write topics like, self-discipline, women, the discipline of children, etc. etc. etc. As you read through this book, place the references of the proverbs that address that topic. When you finish, you will have a topical index into the major themes taught by this book of wisdom.

The words heart, spirit, and soul are mentioned seventy times in this book, which shows us that God addresses our heart, spirit, and soul when He wants to teach us how to live right. A definitive proverb, which is the favorite of many who read this book, is: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Chapter Five

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes speaks to the hearts of the people of God when they are searching for answers to the perplexing dilemmas of life. The word "Ecclesiastes" means "the preacher," and the book by this name is actually a sermon Solomon preached to young men at the end of his life. The tone of his sermon is that while experience is a very convincing teacher, experience is not our only teacher. We do not have to learn everything by experience. The preacher exhorts a younger generation to learn from his experience. Since this sermon is the inspired record of how a man who had the reputation of being the wisest man who ever lived, searched diligently with all his wisdom to find the meaning and purpose of life, "Last Word of Wisdom" God has used this sermon to address the hearts of His people when they are seeking, searching, inquiring, questioning, and even doubting.

A Brief Overview of the Sermon

Ecclesiastes is Solomon's second poetry book. Solomon preached this sermon to the young men of Israel when he was an old man. As we learned in Psalm 127, when Solomon reviewed his life from the perspective and the maturity of old age, with the wisdom learned over many years, he confessed that he had worked very hard, was greatly concerned and built so very many things in vain. This sermon is an expanded version of Psalm 127. He gave this sermon because he fervently hoped that the young men who heard this sermon would learn from his tragic experiences.

Three Quests for Meaning

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon told the young men of Israel that he tried to find the purpose and meaning of life in three areas and that at the end of each of these quests he found nothing but vanity. This introduces us to his favorite word. In his short psalm, in which he confessed his failures, we heard him say, "It is possible to worry, work, and build in vain. Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it. Unless the Lord keeps the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early and sit up late, eating bread of anxious toil." (Psalm 127) We will find that word used frequently in this expanded sermon of Solomon about the purpose and meaning of life.

Riches

Solomon preaches that he sought the meaning and purpose of life through the accumulation of wealth, and he became the wealthiest man who ever lived. However, when he looked at his wealth through the grid of his mortality, he said, "Then I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me." (2:18)

Solomon met a fool in a marketplace and realized that the man who would inherit his wealth might be a man just like that fool. The undeniable reality of that very real possibility led Solomon to write the label "VANITY" across his very successful quest for wealth.

Wisdom

When Solomon realized riches were not the purpose or meaning of life, he gave himself to the pursuit of wisdom. He became the wisest man who ever lived, but he did not find purpose in this pursuit, either. He wrote vanity across his

riches because he couldn't take his riches beyond the grave. And it wasn't long before he labeled his search for the meaning and purpose of life in wisdom to be vanity. This was because he found that he couldn't translate his wisdom into happiness: "In much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain." (1:18)

The statue of the thinker is not the image of the happy man. Ignorance is bliss and bovine contentment is contentment that is based upon ignorance. Because an intense search for knowledge does not increase happiness, Solomon labeled his search for the purpose and meaning of life in wisdom: VANITY.

Pleasure

Solomon's next search for meaning and purpose led him to the pursuit of folly, mirth, and fun. He participated in all the pleasures the world had to offer: "All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure." (2:10a) Nobody ever hit the party scene as hard as Solomon did. But, after all his hedonistic pleasure, Solomon was left with three questions: What good does it do? What use is it? And what am I accomplishing? Solomon discovered that deep in his heart, he knew there was a purpose for his life, and that purpose was not to party all day and night.

The Verdict

At the conclusion of his sermon, Solomon brought his message to a verdict by telling his young hearers that in his lifetime, he had learned one primary truth: " Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil." (12:13-14) The

original Hebrew implies that fearing God and keeping His commandments makes you a whole man. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom because it makes a man who he was meant to become. That is the purpose for which Solomon searched all his life.

The wisdom of Solomon reasoned there absolutely had to be an absolute judgment because he reasoned throughout this sermon that life was filled with injustice. Men inherited wealth they did not earn, the oppressed received no comfort, and those who had much were often discontented. Injustices, disparities, the exploitation of the poor and defenseless by the wicked with impunity, and many other evils, caused Solomon to reason that there simply has to be an absolute judgment.

Inspired Nuggets of Truth in Ecclesiastes

As you read through Ecclesiastes, you will discover a two-track system of truth. At times, Solomon seems to play the role of a skeptical, inquiring and doubting man who has no revelation from God and is merely reasoning like an unspiritual, completely secular man. At other times, he thinks and speaks as a spiritual man with revelation from God. Though Solomon expressed many doubts in the context of that first mindset, the truths he expressed as that other man are profound and help us gain understanding about the purpose and meaning of life.

A passage in chapter three reads: "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted." (1,2) This passage is similar to a passage in Psalm One that tells us the blessed man will yield "his fruit in his season." (3b) God's work in a person's life comes about in God's time.

Solomon also gave us a beautiful insight into marriage when he wrote: "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labor. For, if one falls, the other pulls him up; ... for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken." (4:9-12)

When God designed the marriage relationship, He willed that the man and wife were to be one in mind, body, and spirit. His plan was and is that the deeper dimensions of spirit and mind are to be joyfully expressed through the physical, sexual relationship. Solomon may have had that in mind when he told us that a cord of three strands is not quickly broken. When seen in the context of this perspective on a marriage, sex is an intense form of communication. If the physical relationship in a marriage is not an expression of the deeper levels of mind and spirit, then the sex in that marriage is on an animal level of communication.

In chapter nine, Solomon described a city that was saved through the advice of a wise man: "There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siege works against it. But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man." (14,15) Solomon described the city's forgetting the wise man as an injustice. Though the wise man's efforts were not rewarded, he still concluded that, "the words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools." (17) To him, getting the job done was more important than gaining the credit for getting the job done.

As Solomon closed his sermon, he advised young men to "remember (their) Creator in the days of (their) youth." (12:1) He knew youth to be a time of blessing and fruitfulness, but he also knew that old age inevitably draws near. "Remember Him," Solomon urged, "before the silver cord is broken and the golden

bowl is crushed . . . then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." (6, 7) Those in their youth would do well to remember God and live their lives well because they will face Him in the end. And after all, Solomon determined, the meaning of life was found in his final pronouncement: "Fear God and keep His commandments ... for this will make you a whole man." (13)

Chapter Six

The Song of Solomon

The Song of Solomon is the last of the poetry books. We are told that Solomon wrote 1,005 songs, but this is the only one that has been preserved for us in the Scriptures. This love song records the romance and the love talk of two lovers. Hebrew young men were not to read this Old Testament book until they were thirty years old.

You may be wondering why this book is included in the canon of inspired Scripture. There are several answers to that question. A book such as this teaches the sanctity of the marriage bed. In the Book of Genesis, we heard God say that it was not good for man to be alone. So God created woman to complete him. When God created them male and female, He joined them together in a sexual relationship. According to the creation account, after God created, He declared that what He had created was good. When God created sex, He pronounced that sex is "very good".

If there were no deeper meaning to this love song, the message of the sanctity of sex is important enough for this

beautiful book to be part of the sacred library we call "The Bible." It is very important for parents to teach their children that sex is very good. It is a challenge to teach our children to save sex for marriage without giving them the impression that sex is a sin. If we convince our children that sex is wrong, we can impair their sexual adjustment to marriage. They can enter into marriage with puritanical attitudes toward sex that can seriously limit their own fulfillment and the fulfillment of their spouse.

This love song teaches that God blesses, sanctions, and anoints the marriage bed and "marital bliss". As you read this love Song of Solomon, you will see affirmed God's intention for the joyful expression of the intimacies of sexual love between a man and a woman in the context of marriage.

Devout souls have seen a deeper meaning in this love Song of Solomon. They see profound parallels between the relationship of these two lovers and our relationship to God and Christ, which is often described as a marriage relationship. They believe the Song of Solomon was placed in Scripture as an allegory of the love Jehovah God has for Israel. When you read the New Testament, you discover that this metaphor of a love relationship is also applied to Christ and His church. Christ is the Bridegroom and the church is His bride (Matthew 25:1-13; Revelation 21:2, 17).

Devotional Applications of Song of Solomon

A final allegory that exists in this love song applies to our individual relationship with the living Christ. In the Old Testament, Israel was commanded to love God with all their hearts. Jesus affirms this teaching when He is asked to state the greatest commandment in the Law (Matthew 22:35-40). Our own personal love relationship with God and with Christ is

beautifully represented allegorically by the relationship of these two lovers. This interpretation and application of the Song of Solomon can make this book one of the most devotional books of the Bible - one that teaches us much about an intimate relationship with the risen, living Christ.

Devotional Relational Parallels in the Love Song

The bridegroom in the Song of Solomon first took his bride to his chambers (1:4) and then to his banqueting table (2:4). This suggests that our relationship with Christ should be intimate before it is public. Jesus made much of this in the Sermon on the Mount. He criticized those who offered public prayers and practiced charity publicly because their prayers and their giving were prayed and practiced for man's benefit, not God's (Matthew 6:5-7).

The emphasis of Jesus was that our prayers should be prayed to God in solitude and our giving should be as unto God and anonymous. Martin Luther wrote: "Holy Jesus, gentle child, make Yourself a bed, soft, undefiled within my heart that it may be a quiet chamber kept only for You." Is your heart a quiet chamber kept only for Him?

Whenever the communion was broken between the two lovers in the Song of Solomon, it was never broken by the will of the bridegroom. This picture applies to our communion with Christ. Our communion with Him can be a continuous communion, but when it is short circuited, it is broken because we break it, not Christ. Our broken fellowship with Christ is never because Christ has failed us but because we had been unfaithful to Him.

When the bridegroom in Song of Solomon visits the bride's chamber, he is kept outside, while she is distracted, by applying her perfumes, and other beauty preparations. When she finally opens the door, he is gone (5:1-6). We are often

preoccupied with the anointing or the gifts of the Spirit and we overlook our relationship with the Giver of those spiritual blessings. In our preoccupation with these wonderful manifestations of the charisma of the Holy Spirit, we leave our Bridegroom, Who wants to have an intimate relationship with us, standing outside the door.

The bride in Song of Solomon understands her bridegroom's work: "Let us rise early and go to the vineyards; let us see whether the vine has budded and its blossoms have opened, and whether the pomegranates have bloomed." (7:12) According to what Jesus told Peter in John's Gospel, we can also express our love for Jesus by showing an interest in His flock, by tending His sheep, and by loving the sheep He loves so very much. (John 21:15-17)

What is the primary application of this beautiful poem? Solomon's love song speaks the language of the heart about the most important emotion: love. It describes the most important love relationship that we will ever have - our relationship with Christ - by allegorically profiling His love for us, and our response to His love.

To understand this unique quality of love, we must begin with the love of God. There are two places in the New Testament where we find the love of God analyzed and exhibited. In the love chapter of the Apostle Paul and the love chapter of the Apostle John, the love of God is passed through the prism of their inspired minds and it comes out on the other side as a cluster of virtues (I Corinthians 13; I John 4:7-21). John and Paul will tell us the love of God is: indescribable, irreplaceable, incomparable, indestructible, unconditional, irresistible, inspirational, spiritual, eternal, and supernatural.

When we love with this quality of love, we have the capacity to love our spouses, our children, our parents, and those in our lives who may be more difficult to love. Song of Solomon teaches that the love we share with Christ is private, intimate, exclusive, intense, unselfish, mutual, satisfying, edifying, non-threatening, fruitful, and unquenchable.