

“Old Testament Poetry”

Job-Song of Songs; Proverbs 3:5-6 ¹

The third section of our Old Testament contains five books that are sometimes called books of wisdom, sometimes books of poetry, and often both. Perhaps the most concise definition of biblical “wisdom” is that it is “skill in the art of godly living—that orientation which allows one to live in harmonious accord with God’s ordering of the world.”²

There are three main kinds of wisdom literature. “Proverbial Wisdom” consists of short, pithy aphorisms, the chief example of which is the book of **Proverbs**. “Philosophical Wisdom” struggles with existential questions such as the problems of evil, providence, purpose, and meaning in life. The books of **Job** and **Ecclesiastes** are of this sort.

Books of “Lyric Wisdom,” also written in poetic form, are more like songs, hymns, and ballads. The books of **Psalms** and the **Song of Songs** are in this category.

Each of these five books is written in Hebrew poetry, which is rather different from English poetry. One of the salient features of Hebrew poetry is what is known as “the seconding sequence,” in which a line of poetry generally has two parallel parts. When the second line repeats the meaning of the first line in a different way, the parallelism is called “synonymous.” When the second line contrasts with the first, the parallelism is called “antithetical.” And when the second line continues the thought of the first rather than repeating it, the parallelism is called “synthetic.”

With this brief introduction, then, let’s look at these five books

JOB

Many scholars think Job is the oldest book in the Bible. Although Genesis records events from the very beginning of creation, Genesis was probably not written down as early as Job was. While we don’t know for sure, we think Job was probably written about the time of the Exodus (1450 B.C.), recording events that occurred about 500 years earlier—about the time of Abraham. Job is anonymous, and focuses on the philosophical and theological problems presented by the ageless question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

Job 1:6-7

⁶ One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. ⁷ The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the LORD, “From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.”

The book begins by setting up a back story about which Job never learns. In a conversation in the heavenly court, God brags on Job’s righteousness to Satan, who is apparently one of God’s angels. Satan responds, “Well, of course, he loves you. Look how much you’ve blessed him! Take away those blessings and then see what he does!”

God takes up the wager and allows Satan to destroy Job’s property, his family, and his health, yet Job’s faith does not waver: *“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised”* (Job 1:21).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on July 7, 2013.

² *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), p. 866.

Job 2:11-13

¹¹ When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. ¹² When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. ¹³ Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Three of Job's friends hear about his sorrow and misery and travel to console him. Unfortunately, they are very much caught up in the conventional wisdom that good times always represent God's blessing and bad times always represent God's judgment, so they hammer Job day after day, saying "You must have done something truly awful for all this to happen to you. If you repent, God will bless you."

Job persistently refuses to repent, protesting his faithfulness and righteousness, which we know from the back story is, in fact, justified. As the debate rages through three cycles of speeches, Job cries out against God's injustice on the one hand, while continuing to affirm his faith on the other: "*I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth*" (Job 19:25).

Job 42:5-6

⁵ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. ⁶ Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

The book has a dramatic denouement in which God confronts Job and then affirms and blesses him for his faithfulness. In the end, the problem of evil is never resolved in a way that satisfies modern sensibilities, but "there can be little doubt that a resolution is achieved in the presence of the Creator, the only place where the meaning of human suffering can be understood."³

PSALMS

The book of Psalms is the Bible's hymnal, composed of intensely personal poems that have been adapted for congregational use. While King David is credited with half of the psalms, a number of other persons contributed to the anthology over a period of nearly a thousand years.

The Psalter has been edited into five "books" of psalms that correlate roughly with the five books of Moses, and the psalms cover a number of topics, such as praise of Scripture, laments in hard times, expressions of faith, thanksgiving, and praise, requests for forgiveness, and even imprecation, or calling down curses on one's enemies. Let's look at just a few examples of these:

In praise of Scripture**Psalm 19:7-11**

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. ⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. ¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. ¹¹ By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

³ *ESV Study Bible*, p. 868.

Psalm 119:11

¹¹ I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Psalm 119:105

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Psalms of Lament**Psalm 22:1, 7, 14, 16-18**

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? . . . ⁷ All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. . . . ¹⁴ I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. . . . ¹⁶ Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. ¹⁷ All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. ¹⁸ They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

Psalms of Faith**Psalm 9:9-10**

⁹ The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. ¹⁰ Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.

Psalm 23:1-6

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Psalms asking for Forgiveness**Psalm 51:1-2**

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

Psalm 32:5

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Psalms of Praise & Thanksgiving**Psalm 100:1-5**

¹ Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. ² Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. ³ Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. ⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. ⁵ For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Psalm 150:1-6

¹ Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. ² Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. ³ Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, ⁴ praise him with timbrel and

dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, ⁵ praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. ⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs is a compilation of aphorisms related to everyday wisdom for godly living. Dating from the time of King Solomon, Solomon may be its primary source, but a number of other authors wrote the proverbs, collected them, and edited them over time. Key themes in Proverbs affirm that (1) God's will is intensely practical; (2) a life lived in God's will is a happy life; (3) a life lived in God's will is a useful life; (4) a life lived in God's will is achieved by diligence and discipline; and (5) such a life is available to those who seek it.⁴

Proverbs 3:5-6

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

These two verses provide a good summary of the whole message of Proverbs, and they are the text for the homily that will follow our overview.

Proverbs 3:13-18

¹³ Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, ¹⁴ for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.

Proverbs personifies Wisdom and presents her as "more profitable than silver and yielding better returns than gold." The source of Wisdom is to be rightly related to God.

Proverbs 16:2

² All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the LORD.

Proverbs 16:25

²⁵ There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.

Proverbs 21:2

² A person may think their own ways are right, but the LORD weighs the heart.

One of the themes of Proverbs has to do with how easily we deceive ourselves about our true motives. God alone knows the truth of our hearts, and God alone can guide us to the Way that leads to Life.

ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes, another anonymous book, takes its name from the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew word, "qohelet," which means "preacher," "speaker," or "teacher," so the author is often referred to simply as "Qoheleth." Dating from the time of Solomon, this seemingly cynical book is an existential essay on the meaning of life, and intends "to spare future generations the bitterness of learning through their own experience that life is meaningless apart from God."⁵

⁴ *ESV Study Bible*, p. 1131.

⁵ *The Life Application Bible, New Living Translation* (Tyndale House, 1996), p. 1024.

Ecclesiastes 1:2

² *“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”*

Ecclesiastes 1:18

¹⁸ *For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.*

Ecclesiastes was a very important book during a certain season of my own life, demonstrating that it was—and is—possible to be so cynical as Qoheleth is while still being in relationship with God.

Ecclesiastes 3:1

¹ *There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:*

Ecclesiastes 3:11

¹¹ *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

One of the best-known themes in Ecclesiastes is its emphasis on the cycles and times of life. Other themes include the vanity and meaninglessness of human life, the tragedies of sin and death, the joy and frustration of work, the fear of God, and the grateful enjoyment of God’s good gifts.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

¹³ *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.* ¹⁴ *For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.*

SONG OF SONGS

The Song of Songs, also known as The Song of Solomon, was probably written during his reign, but we really don’t know who wrote it. The book is a steamy love story, so scandalously sensual that there have been not a few folk who thought it out of place in Scripture.

One of the ways the scandal has been side-stepped is by interpreting the book as an allegory of God’s love for Israel, or of Christ’s love for the Church. More literal interpretations sometimes involve Solomon, a shepherdess, and a young shepherd, together with a chorus of friends that functions somewhat as the chorus did in Greek drama.

Song of Songs 2:2-5

² *Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the young women.*

³ *Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.* ⁴ *Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love.* ⁵ *Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love.*

Probably the best way to understand the drama is as the story of two betrothed Israelite young people who look forward to their marriage and to the pleasure of consummating their love. One of the best-known lines in the book is this: “He leads me to his banqueting table, and his banner over me is love.”

Homily

Well, that’s a quick overview of the poetic books of Hebrew Scripture. Let’s look again at our text, Proverbs 3:5-6: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own*

understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths.” Keep that text in mind as you view the question on the next slide: “What would you do if you were not afraid?”

This question, taken from the best-selling book, *Who Moved My Cheese?*⁶ provides the frame in which we’ll look at our text. The question we consider is “How does God direct our paths?”

One of the things I enjoyed most as a ship driver was sailing down the Cooper River from the Navy Base at Charleston, South Carolina to the sea, a journey of some six miles. Like all inland waterways for deep-draft vessels, the deep-water channel was dredged only in the center of the river, and wandering outside that channel meant running your ship aground.

While there were several ways to stay in the center of the channel, the simplest and quickest way was to look at the two orange range markers at each end of each leg of the river. When the range markers were vertically aligned, you knew you were in the center of the channel. I want to suggest four range markers of a different sort that can be very helpful in discerning God’s leadership and direction in our lives.

Range Marker #1: Opportunity. Mary Cosby, co-founder of The Church of the Saviour in The District, the church Jim Rouse attended, identified four signs of God’s leadership about what we’re to do next:

Mary said that God’s will is so SIMPLE that it can probably be stated in one sentence. At the same time, God’s will often seems so IMPOSSIBLE that we can’t imagine any way that we’d be able to accomplish it. Beyond this, God’s will is PERSISTENT, such that no matter how much we try to ignore it, it is nearly always at the edges of our consciousness. And finally, God’s will glorifies God; it is NOT AN EGO-TRIP for us.

I want to take the first three of these together as Range Marker #1, which I call OPPORTUNITY. In considering God’s direction for your life, consider first of all that which presents itself to you as a simple, impossible, and persistent opportunity. Of course, ideas that are simple, impossible and persistent can also be both irrational and insane, so we need more range markers to sense God’s direction.

Range Marker #2: God’s Word. Is this idea, this opportunity, consistent with the Bible as a whole? Is it consistent with the teaching of Jesus? God will never ask you to do anything that is inconsistent with the Word, but you have to *know* the Word in order to apply this test.

Range Marker #3: God’s Kingdom. Will this idea, this opportunity, help God’s Kingdom to “come on earth as it is in heaven,” or is this something that honesty would have to call selfishness and self-interest? Life is not about accumulating a lot of stuff, and neither is it really about you. All of creation is moving toward the fulfillment of God’s purposes, and, while following God’s guidance calls out the best that we have to give and brings great adventure and satisfaction, God’s guidance never leads us to magnify ourselves. Following God’s guidance is not an ego-trip.

Range Marker #4: God’s Spirit. If God is in an opportunity, you’ll have spiritual peace about pursuing it, even if you have to move forward with unanswered questions. You’ll miss most of the adventure God plans for you if you choose safety over obedience. Jesus told us, “*If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life*” (Luke 9:24).

⁶ Spencer Johnson, M.D., foreword by Kenneth Blanchard, Ph.D., *Who Moved My Cheese? An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1998, 2002).

So when the range markers begin to line up, know that adventure lies ahead! But while such moments are exciting, they're also scary. Henry Blackaby pointed out that "Anytime God leads you to do something that has God-sized dimensions, you will face a crisis of belief. When you face a crisis of belief, what you do next reveals what you really believe about God. This is the crisis point, where many decide not to follow what they sense God is leading them to do."

What would have happened if . . .

- Noah had said, "I don't do arks";
- Abraham had said, "I don't do destinations unknown";
- Moses had said, "I don't do Pharaohs";
- Ruth had said, "I don't do Mothers-in-Law";
- David had said, "I don't do giants";
- Mary had said, "I don't do virgin births";
- Peter had said, "I don't do Gentiles";
- Paul had said, "I don't do letters";
- Jesus had said, "I don't do crosses"?

All of these people got orders that were simple, impossible, and persistent, that were consistent with God's Word, God's Kingdom, and God's Spirit, and yet they were tempted to say, as we are, "I'm sorry. I'm not going to do that" . . . but they didn't.

I conclude with these words from a song by Steven Curtis Chapman: "The long-awaited rains have fallen hard upon the thirsty ground and carved their way to where the wild and rushing river can be found. And like the rains, I have been carried here to where the river flows.

"My heart is racing and my knees are weak as I walk to the edge. I know there is no turning back once my feet have left the ledge, and in the rush I hear a Voice that's telling me it's time to take the leap of faith. . . ."⁷

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

What would you do if you were not afraid?

⁷ Steven Curtis Chapman, "The Dive," lyrics by Kurt Cobain and Krist Novoselic, © EMI Music Publishing, Universal Music Publishing Group.