

## Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs

As we said yesterday the five books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are known as the Wisdom Literature of the Bible. This morning we are going to be looking at Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

### Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings from a number of authors. Solomon's name is prominent. But some it is also attributed to Agur and to Lemuel.

There are a number of ways in which the book can be divided up but at its simplest it falls into two parts:

- Ch's 1-9
- Ch's 10-31

The first nine chapters lay the foundation for everything that is to follow. It is the first nine chapters that provide the context for understanding everything that follows.

So I want us to spend a bit of time getting to grips with these opening chapters.

The book begins: "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their griddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

These opening seven verses tell us what the whole book is about. We have this book in the Bible so that we can:

- Know wisdom and instruction
- Understand words of insight (i.e. the Bible)
- Receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice and equity. What is striking about these qualities? It is Israel's repeated failures in these areas which led to God's judgement coming upon them.
- To give prudence to the simple (i.e. this book is for everyone not just clever people)
- To give knowledge and discretion to the young
- To teach us
- To guide us

But where do you start in getting wisdom like this. Is it enough just to read the book of Proverbs and try your best to do what it says? "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

What is a "fool" in biblical terms? A fool is someone who lives his life as if there was no God. A fool takes no account of God in his day-to-day life (Psalm 14vs1). And a fool is set up here as the opposite to someone who seeks to gain knowledge or wisdom. The fear of the Lord is beginning of knowledge, i.e. you can only truly be wise – you can only truly gain heavenly knowledge – if you fear God.

To fear God is to be the opposite of the fool. To fear God is to live your life in the light of the fact that there is a God who rules supreme over the universe – there is a God in whose hands is our life. To fear God is to respond to him accordingly in humble worship, trust and obedience.

So immediately at the start of the book we see that this is a book for God's people. The teaching of the book can only be seriously taken to heart by those who have a right view of and relationship with God.

The rest of the opening nine chapters are then a series of addresses alternating between a father talking to his son and the personification of wisdom talking. The father wants his son to be wise and to avoid sin. 1vs8-19 is the first of the addresses to the son reminding him to heed the teaching he has received and to avoid having anything to do with sinners.

In ch's 2 and 3 the father reminds his son that wisdom comes from the Lord. Ch.2 starts – "My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding."

There is a circularity of blessing here. You need to have a proper view of and relationship with God in order to gain wisdom, but then the more wisdom you gain – the greater your knowledge – the more you will humbly worship God. That reminds us of the depth that there is to God – that we can never exhaust our understanding of him.

That is why the father is so keen for the son to pursue this course – "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 straight your paths."

And this is because the more wise a person is then the more godlike they are. In 3vs19 we read – "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by his understanding he established the heavens." As such wisdom is truly beyond price – "Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed." (3vs13-18)

Interspersed throughout these fatherly exhortations we have wisdom personified as a lady.

- 1vs20-33: she is in the city streets – the hustle and bustle of commercial and civic life and she cries out her challenge.
- 3vs13-20: she is spoken about in the third person. She is said to be more valuable than silver, gold and jewels. This is the stuff you get from commerce. But what does she give? Long life, honour, pleasantness and peace
- 8: Once more she speaks, this time at the city gates and one of the recurring themes of her speech is justice and truth.
- 9vs1-6: She is pictured here as being ready to welcome anyone who will come. Wisdom is there for anyone if they will just come. How do they come? 9vs10 repeats the great opening truth – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."

Lady Wisdom is portrayed as everything that is attractive, right, just and honourable. But she isn't the only lady pictured in this opening section.

- Ch.5 – the forbidden woman [READ 5vs3-8]
- Ch.6 – the evil woman [READ 6vs23-29]
- Ch.7 – the forbidden woman again [read sense of 7vs6-27]
- Ch.9 – the woman Folly [READ 9vs13-18]

There are two levels to these warnings in this opening section. Firstly, there is the obvious direct application of the folly of sexual sin. As a father giving instruction to his growing up son, he has to highlight the dangers of sexual immorality because the temptation is so strong. Every young man will face sexual temptation in just about every walk of life so it is absolutely right that we be on our guard against it.

The second level though is to see this as the introduction to the book where the forbidden woman is seducing and tempting into every sort of folly, not just sexual sin. She wants to lure as many people as possible away from Lady Wisdom and she will do that in whatever way she can and so these opening chapters set out the truth that the fundamental choice that faces all of us in life lies between Lady Wisdom whose home is built on the foundation of the fear of the Lord, and Lady Folly, who seduces fools away from true worship to the worship of idols.

Having done that the rest of the book then sets out what wisdom looks like in practice in all areas of life. Most of what follows are short pithy sayings, often in couplets or, less frequently, in number form which speak very practically to life. There are some longer sections notably chapter 31.

- 13vs18 – contrasting couplet
- 16vs18 – developing couplet
- 30vs15-16 – number/list proverb

A useful way to study the proverbs is to do so thematically as the book has lots to say about certain areas of life. What?

- Pride
- Anger
- Self-control
- Hard work and laziness
- Money (and poverty)
- The tongue
- Parents and children
- The nation/the king (leaders)
- Greed
- Quarrelling
- Justice
- Righteousness and wickedness
- Wisdom and folly.

What approach are we to take in reading the proverbs?

1. This is how God wants his people to live.
2. In this life – Proverbs do not equal promises; rather they equal probabilities. The proverbs focus in the general rule.
3. In the life to come the Proverbs have their absolute fulfilment.

Ch.26vs4-5 illustrate point 2 above. Indicates that the proverbs must be appropriately applied to each individual situation.

26vs20-22: gossip and quarrelling

26vs13-16 & 17: amusing, but make a point very well.

## **Ecclesiastes**

The book of Ecclesiastes is one that has confounded many people. There are reams of articles and plenty of online sermons all which say that the book is hard to understand and it is unclear what the point of the book is.

And it is true that there are parts of Ecclesiastes which are hard to know what it is the writer is getting at or actually saying. But in terms of the book's big message we can read the closing verses and see what conclusion the writer comes to – "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." (12vs13-14)

So this tells us that the main purpose of the book is to encourage the humble, obedient worship of God. So everything that we read before this must be read in the light of this conclusion.

So let's go back to the start. Who wrote the book? "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." We are not given a name. We are just told that it is a son of David who calls himself "the Preacher". This could have been Solomon or someone else from the line of David. From what we know about Solomon from the rest of the Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes would certainly fit.

Throughout the book there are a couple of words or phrases that keep cropping up:

- Vanity – 31 times
- Under the sun – 28 times
- Striving after wind – 9 times

The Hebrew word which we have translated as "vanity" is the word "Hevel". Literally it means "vapour". It is something insubstantial and fleeting. You can't get hold of it – it just slips through your fingers and is blown away into nothingness.

"Under the sun" – life on earth. But a bit more than that – an earthly perspective on matters. The world viewed from earth's perspective.

And it is with this word "hevel" that the book begins. 1vs2-11 are an introductory statement – "Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." And then he goes on to show how the whole of earthly existence is indeed a vapour.

You work hard, but for no reason. You don't gain anything and death overtakes you. And every day just comes around like the last one – the sun comes up, the sun goes down – monotonous, repetitive, pointless and boring. It is the same with the wind – they just keep on blowing around the earth. And the water keeps flowing in the streams but it never manages to fill the sea to overflowing. The whole course of nature just seems like one big drudgery.

And it is the same for us as humans. We see lots and hear lots but never enough to satisfy us. And nothing new ever happens anyway. What is being said and done has been said and done before. It is just that no-one remembers it just like no-one will remember us in times to come.

Taken on its own these few verses are a particularly cynical and depressing view of life. And it all follows on from the book of Proverbs. Here is the wise way to live says Proverbs and Ecclesiastes immediately says that it is all just pointless.

Having got our attention with that introduction what the book seeks to show is that if you take a mere earthly perspective on matters then everything is without real meaning and purpose. The Preacher works through a number of different scenarios:

- Intellectual understanding. [note different meaning of the word “wisdom” to proverbs].
- Self-indulgence and sensual pleasure
- Wise living
- Hard work

After considering each of these the refrain is the same – it was all as meaningful as striving after the wind. Why? What made it all like chasing the wind?

- We have no control over time. The time for everything has already been allotted and we cannot change that in any way (3vs1-8)
- We will all end up as food for worms no matter what we do now (3vs18-22)

And when he looks around and sees all the injustice in the world – all of this together leads him to the conclusion that it would have been better if he had never been born.

And these are the repeated themes in the book. But interspersed with them are a number of reflections that the Preacher has:

- Despite all this – since we are in this world – it is better to be wise than foolish (9vs11+)
- This is confirmed in ch.7 with picture of people deluding themselves through merriment and jocularly – how like our world and its constant stream on inanity.
- Since we are in the world we may as well enjoy for the moment the good things that God has given us:
  - Work – 3vs12
  - Eating, drinking, work – 2vs24
  - Family – 9vs9

So far the book is pretty depressing but why would we expect anything else when we only take an “under the sun” view of matters. If God is never in the picture then life will always be depressing. In western cultures the rise in depression type mental conditions is huge. And that is in direct correlation to the ever-greater removal of God from the fabric of our society.

But interspersed throughout the book are passages that remind us that there is another perspective on life. It might just be an odd phrase or a paragraph. In 3vs11 we have this phrase that God has “put eternity into the heart of men” – there is more to life than this earth. It does not all end with the pointlessness of death. We have eternity in our hearts.

In ch.5vs1-7 – the Preacher says that you cannot just ignore the fact that your whole life is lived before God. There is a recognition of accountability.

In ch.8vs10-13 – the Preacher acknowledges that God’s justice will catch up with the wicked and the unjust. And that those who truly fear God will be alright in the end.

And it is this “above the sun” perspective that leads us to the conclusion of the book. If life is lived without any account of God then it is all meaningless. Career, status, wealth, pleasure all come to nothing. But life needs to be lived with God in the picture knowing that he sees all and that he is intimately interested in all – interested enough to pass judgement on everything. Live in the light of God and suddenly everything has a whole new meaning.

## **Song of Songs**

This book is sometimes referred to as the Song of Solomon. Both titles come from vs.1 of the book – “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.” Whether this means that it was written by Solomon or that it was dedicated to Solomon is not clear and people take different views. A third view is that “of Solomon” means that the book is written in the wisdom tradition of Solomon, i.e. the book is by an unknown author and is Solomonesque in character.

Personally I think it was written by someone other than Solomon. The characters in the book are not royalty. They are the ordinary people of life – particularly the woman. And secondly, in view of what the book is about (which we will come onto shortly), I don’t think Solomon knew much of this from experience. He was a man with 1,000 wives and concubines. This book was not written by someone like that.

It is a book which has caused (and continues to cause) disagreement among Christians and some discomfort. It is written as a love story – the courtship and the marriage of a man and a woman. And it doesn’t hold back from describing what goes on. It is beautiful poetry parts of which are sexually suggestive and parts of which are sexually explicit.

So what is it all about? It is all about love, but whose love?

Historically and by far the most popular approach to the Song of Songs is to say that it is a book about the love of God for his people. It is picture language to describe the relationship of God with his people. Now such an interpretation might be appealing if you are preaching publicly through the book because you won’t have to talk about sex and can instead focus on edifying observations about prayer and bible reading – “Don’t worry. It is all about Jesus!”

But does it really read like that. I read a funny story the other day when preparing for this. A Sunday school teacher in Australia began her class with the question – “What’s grey, furry and lives in eucalyptus trees?” She got no response. She asked again – no response. So she directly asked the pastor’s daughter to which the slow reply came – “Miss, I know the answer must be Jesus, but it sure sounds like a koala to me.” Sometimes a koala really is just a koala and not a picture of Jesus.

And so another approach to the book is to say that Song of Songs is simply a celebration of human love and sex. It is a beautiful poem showing the gift of love in God’s creation of man and woman. And so the book becomes the poetic version of a dating and marriage counselling book.

Now practical tips on dating and marriage are vitally important but again we ask the question does that really fit. The opening words as we have seen are – “The Song of Songs.” This is a superlative. It indicates that this poem is the finest of songs, in the same way that the Holy of Holies was the very holiest of places in the temple.

Is the human love seen in marriage the worthy subject of the very best of songs? The Bible tells us that true love – the best of love – is that God loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4vs10). So the finest of songs surely has to point us in some profound way to God’s love for us in Christ.

But these two are not mutually exclusive. What is one of the most frequently used pictures in the Bible of the relationship of God with his people and Christ with his church? Marriage. It is throughout the pages of the Old and New Testaments.

So I believe that the natural reading of the Song of Songs is that it is wisdom literature which celebrates the wonder and the beauty of the mutual love of a man and woman leading up to and during marriage. But this celebration not only shapes our thinking about human relationships but also gives us profound insights into the love that Christ has for his bride, the church. The man in the book is not a direct reference to Christ. He is a man who loves a girl, but in that love he reminds us of Christ.

With that view of the book, let's turn to it. There are three characters in the book – the boy, the girl and a group of onlookers. It is not always clear who is speaking when but mostly we can work it out.

The opening poem (1vs2-7) introduces us to the basic theme of the book. We hear the voice of the young woman who delights in her man – a shepherd. They are not married yet but it becomes clear that they are engaged and that they cannot wait to be together.

Then the poem moves on to chapter 4 with a recurring theme of seeking and finding. The couple look for each other and find each other and delight in each other's presence. They embrace but they are not yet married. So twice in this section the woman speaks to her friends – "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases."

The intensity of their mutual desire is so great that she warns others not to stir it up until it can find its fulfilment in marriage. If ever there was advice that young people needed to hear today here it is. The book is realistic about the strength of sexual desire and the need to be alert to it.

Then in chapter 4 they get married and the finally they can properly and wonderfully give in to the desire they have for each other. They glory in each other.

In chapter 5 onwards there is then a disagreement. She was tired and had gone to bed so he leaves the house. She relents and gets up but it is too late and she throws dignity to the wind and goes searching for him. She is desperate but she finds him and they are reunited to enjoy each other once more. Everything is sorted out.

The book ends with three-pronged epilogue in 8vs5-14:

- The overwhelming power of love
- The incomparable value of love
- The ongoing nature of love

It is also worth noting that there is a lot of garden imagery in the book. That maybe to make us think of the unashamed love of Adam and Eve in their pre-fall state in the Garden of Eden when the relationship was truly perfect.

The poetry of the book shows us the power, intensity and longing for the great gift of love between a man and a woman that finds its fulfilment in marriage. Christians should celebrate marriage. We should be jealous for marriage. We should honour marriage. And yet we also see that marriage points to something even deeper.

Eph. 5vs28 – "husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."