

I. **HOW TO INTERPRET THE PSALMS.**

- A. Because they are not propositions, or imperatives, or stories that illustrate doctrines; psalms do not function primarily for the teaching of doctrine or moral behavior. Yet they are profitable when used for the purposes intended by God who inspired them: for helping us;
1. To express ourselves to God.
 2. To consider His ways.
- B. **Psalms as Poetry.**
Perhaps the most important thing to remember in reading or interpreting the Psalms should also be the most obvious: they are poems--musical poems.
1. One needs to be aware that Hebrew poetry, by its very nature, was addressed, as it were, to the mind through the heart (much of the language is intentionally emotive).
 2. One must also remember that the Psalms are not just any kind of poems; they are musical poems.
 3. It is likewise important to remember that the vocabulary of poetry is purposefully metaphorical. Thus one must take care to look for the intent of the metaphor.
- C. **Psalms as Literature.**
1. The Psalms are of several different types.
 2. Each of the Psalms are also characterized by form. By form we mean the particular type. (Ex.: business letters have a different form than personal letters but they are both letters.)
 3. Each type of psalm is also intended to have a given function in the life of Israel.
 4. One must also learn to recognize various patterns within the Psalms. The psalmists frequently took delight in certain arrangements or repetitions of words and sounds, as well as stylistic plays upon words.
 5. Each psalm must be read as a literary unit.
 6. Psalms are functional. They are hymns, but they also serve the critical function of making connection between the worshiper and God.
- D. **Types of Psalms.**
It is possible to group the Psalms into seven, different categories:
1. Laments.
This is the largest group that express struggles, suffering and disappointments to the Lord.
See 3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 120, 139, 142.
 2. Thanksgiving.
These are opposite of the laments. These psalms express joy for any reason.
See 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138.
 3. Hymns of praise.
These psalms center about the theme of praising God for His greatness, beneficence, and love.
See 8, 19, 104, 148, 149.
 4. Salvation History.
These psalms review the history of God's saving works among the people of Israel, especially the deliverance from Egypt. See 78, 105, 106, 135, 136.
 5. Celebration and Affirmation.
This group includes covenant renewal liturgies (Psa. 50, 81), which speaks of revival of the relationship that was born at Mt. Sinai; royal psalms dealing with the kingship (Psa. 2, 18, 20, 45, 72, 110, 144); and enthronement psalms which celebrates the enthronement ceremony of the king of Israel (Psa. 24, 29, 47, 93, 95-99).

6. Wisdom.

These psalms refer to having wisdom and the wise life.

See 36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133.

7. Songs of Trust.

Ten psalms in this group (11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, 131). The focus of these writings is on that fact that God can be trusted, even in times of despair.

E. **Benefits of the Psalms.**

1. How do the words spoken to God function for us as a Word from God? Precisely in the ways they functioned in Israel in the first place--as opportunities to speak to God in words He inspired others to speak to Him in times past.

2. Three things to remember:

a. The psalms are a guide to worship.

b. The psalms demonstrate to us how we can relate honestly to God. They, by example, instruct.

c. The psalms demonstrate the importance of reflection and meditation upon the things that God has done for us.

F. But also remember, that the psalms are not a guarantee of a pleasant life. We are to praise in good times and in times of distress.

II. **HOW TO INTERPRET THE WISDOM LITERATURE (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Job).**

A. Three OT books are known as "wisdom" books: Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and Job. A number of the Psalms may also be considered in this category too.

B. **The Nature of Wisdom.**

1. Wisdom is the discipline of applying truth to one's life in the light of experience. The wise person is highly practical, not merely theoretical. Responsible, successful living is the goal. It is not so much the case that people seek to learn how to be wise, but rather that they seek to get wise.

2. Particular to wisdom literature is that of parallelisms:

a. Synonymous parallelism (Prov. 7:4).

Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"

And call understanding *your* intimate friend;

b. Antithetical parallelism (Prov. 10:1).

The proverbs of Solomon.

A wise son makes a father glad,

But a foolish son is a grief to his mother.

c. "Formal" parallelism (Prov. 21:16).

A man who wanders from the way of understanding

Will rest in the assembly of the dead.

d. Acrostics (see Prov. 31:10-31).

e. Alliteration (Eccl. 3:1-8).

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven--

2 A time to give birth and a time to die;

A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.

3 A time to kill and a time to heal;

A time to tear down and a time to build up.

4 A time to weep and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn and a time to dance.

5 A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;

A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.

6 A time to search and a time to give up as lost;

A time to keep and a time to throw away.

7 A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;

A time to be silent and a time to speak.
8 A time to love and a time to hate;
A time for war and a time for peace.

- f. Numerical sequences (see Prov. 30:15-31).
- g. Countless comparisons (similes and metaphors).
- h. Formal parables, allegories, and riddles.

C. **Ecclesiastes.**

- 1. The bulk of the book, everything but the final two verses, represents a brilliant, artful argument for the way one would look at life--if God did not play a direct, intervening role and if there was no life after death.
- 2. It is the secular, fatalistic wisdom that a practical (not theoretical) atheism produces. When one relegates God to a position way out there away from us, irrelevant to our daily lives, then Ecclesiastes is the result.
- 3. Except for the last two verses, the book says that the reality and finality of death means that life has no ultimate value.

D. **Job.**

- 1. Ecclesiastes is not the only place in the OT where incorrect advice is found as a foil for God's truth. The Book of Job contains all sorts of wrong advice and incorrect conclusions as they come from the lips of Job's well-meaning "comforters," Bildad, Zophar, Eliphaz, and Elihu.
- 2. It seems so natural to assume that if God is in control of the world, everything that happens must be His doing, according to His will. We must remember, however, that the Scriptures do not teach this. Rather, they teach that the world is fallen, corrupted by sin, under the domination of Satan (Jn. 12:31), and that many things happen in life that are not as God wishes them to be.
Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.
Specifically, suffering is not necessarily the result of sin (Rom. 8:18-23).
For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.
- 3. The reader of the book of Job learns what is simply the world's wisdom, seemingly logical but actually wrong, and what constitutes God's wisdom and what builds confidence in God's sovereignty and righteousness.

E. **Proverbs.**

- 1. The book of Proverbs is the primary locus of prudential wisdom--that is, rules and regulations people can use to help themselves live responsible, successful lives.
- 2. What Proverbs does say is that, ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL, there are basic attitudes and patterns of behavior that will help a person grow into responsible adulthood. They do not state everything about a truth but they point toward it. See Prov. 6:27-29.
*Can a man take fire in his bosom
And his clothes not be burned?
28 Or can a man walk on hot coals
And his feet not be scorched?
29 So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife;
Whoever touches her will not go unpunished.*
- 3. A proverb is a brief, particular (pithy) expression of a truth. The briefer a statement is, the less likely it is to be totally precise and universally applicable.

4. Proverbs 16:3 is the sort of proverb that is often misinterpreted.

*Commit your works to the LORD
And your plans will be established.*

It does not say that one's plan must succeed. It teaches that lives committed to God and lives according to His will succeed according to God's definition of success. Nowhere does Proverbs teach automatic success.

F. **Other Considerations.**

1. Each inspired proverb must be balanced with others and understood in comparison with the rest of Scripture. By failing to balance proverbs against one another and against the rest of Scripture (let alone common sense) many people do themselves and others a great injustice.
2. No proverb is a complete statement of truth. No proverb is so perfectly worded that it can stand up to the unreasonable demand that it apply in every situation at every time. See Prov. 22:6.
*Train up a child in the way he should go,
Even when he is old he will not depart from it.*
3. A good many proverbs express their truths according to practices and institutions that no longer exist, although they were common to the OT Israelites. See Prov. 22:11; 25:24.
(Prov 22:11) *He who loves purity of heart
And whose speech is gracious, the king is his friend.*
(Prov 25:24) *It is better to live in a corner of the roof
Than in a house shared with a contentious woman.*
4. The order of the Proverbs has always been a mystery.