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**Core Seminar**

**How to Study the Bible**

**Class 6: Biblical Genres: Poetic & Wisdom Writings**

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*“My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.”* (Ps. 45.1)

1. **Introduction**

By a show of hands, how many of you have watched a *Star Wars* movie?

By a show of hands, how many of you have watched *The Sound of Music*?

Typically, more hands go up for the first option than the second. I think that has mainly to do with the fact that *The Sound of Music* is a musical – it’s a movie genre with acquired taste.

Sometimes, when we read the bible we tend to favor some genres over others.

For instance, narrative is easy to follow. We have facts, people, places, events. Things are going on and we understand what’s happening most of the time. But poetry, on the other hand, seems like a potential minefield. Imagery, metaphors, parallelism, hyperbole – it’s easy to misunderstand. Similarly, wisdom literature can be difficult to grasp. For example, can we interpret the Proverbs as rock-solid truths for all of life and time, or are they more general in their application.

In this morning’s class, we’re going to cover the two genres of poetry and wisdom literature. If you have a handout, you’ll see…

1. **Why Poetic and Wisdom Literature together?**

The poetic books of the bible are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. They all largely have elements of poetic structure, and contain much in the way of what we call wisdom literature.

These might not seem like two genres that go together very naturally, but as we walk through some Scriptural texts I hope you’ll see that it’s actually quite a natural relationship. But before we get to that let’s start with figuring out what wisdom literature is first.

1. **What is Wisdom Literature?**

Wisdom literature is essentially instructions for successful living; or reflections upon the reality of human existence. Broadly speaking, we see a two types of wisdom literature in the bible:

**Proverbial wisdom** - short, pithy sayings that state rules for personal happiness and welfare (*e.g*. Proverbs).

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1

**Speculative wisdom** - monologues (*e.g*. Ecclesiastes) or dialogues (*e.g*. Job) which attempt to delve into such problems as the meaning of existence and the relationship between God and man.

**16**I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” **17**And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-17

**15**Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said:

**2** “Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge,

and fill his belly with the east wind?

**3** Should he argue in unprofitable talk,

or in words with which he can do no good?

**4** But you are doing away with the fear of God

and hindering meditation before God.

**5** For your iniquity teaches your mouth,

and you choose the tongue of the crafty.

**6** Your own mouth condemns you, and not I;

your own lips testify against you.

Job 15:1-6

**16**Then Job answered and said:

**2** “I have heard many such things;

miserable comforters are you all.

**3** Shall windy words have an end?

Or what provokes you that you answer?

**4** I also could speak as you do,

if you were in my place;

I could join words together against you

and shake my head at you.

**5** I could strengthen you with my mouth,

and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.

Job 16:1-5

The wisdom literature contains both the moral substance of true wisdom (Prv) and also the intellectual explorations of wise men seeking to understand the fundamental problems of human existence (Jb, Eccl).

**The starting point for an understanding of OT wisdom literature is Proverbs**.

The wisdom of Proverbs concerns morality - the knowledge of how to live properly. It has a theological foundation - the starting point, as for all wisdom, which is the reverence of God.

But for the most part, the book details the fundamentals of morality, the virtues of integrity, discipline, justice, common sense, and the like, and to show by way of contrast the failure in life that awaits the fool. The book is strongly didactic – that is, its geared heavily toward moral instruction. Even how it’s designed lends itself to being more easily memorized than other passages of Scripture.

With Proverbs as your starting point for wisdom literature, you begin to complement it with other wisdom books that offer the same truths, but from different perspectives.

Like the booster rockets that sit on a rocket ship, and work together with the main thruster to get it into orbit, so the books of Ecclesiastes and Job serve the central book of Proverbs.

**Ecclesiastes tests the wisdom claims of Proverbs through the lens of skepticism.**

Here you have King Solomon, reflecting the wisdom of a man who has lived long and seen the world from all perspectives. He describes the grief and sadness of the world from the perspective of an observer – noticing that anything lived in this life apart from God is vanity – work, knowledge, power, pleasure.

**Job, on the other hand, tests the wisdom claims of Proverbs through his own awful suffering.**

His is a lived experience - Job grasps the problems from within, from the perspective of the sufferer.

* 1. **Main Features of wisdom literature**

Wisdom literature features **several literary devices as aids to memory**.

The most frequent device was the use of **poetic** **parallelism**, which we’ll cover a little later. Some other features include:

* Comparisons (*e.g*. Pr. 17:1)

*Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.*

* Numerical sequences (*e.g*. Pr. 6:16-19)

***16*** *There are six things that the Lord hates,*

*seven that are an abomination to him:*

***17*** *haughty eyes, a lying tongue,*

*and hands that shed innocent blood,*

***18*** *a heart that devises wicked plans,*

*feet that make haste to run to evil,*

***19*** *a false witness who breathes out lies,*

*and one who sows discord among brothers.*

* Alliteration and acrostic patterns (*e.g*. Ps. 37; Pr. 31:10–31) – more on that later
* Riddles (Jdg. 14:12ff – Samson’s riddle)
* Fables (*e.g*. Jdg. 9:7–15; Ezk. 17:3ff.; 19:1ff.),
* Parables (*e.g*. 2 Sa. 12:1–4 – Nathan Rebukes David)
* Allegories (*e.g*. Is. 5:1–7)

\*\*Any Questions?\*\*

1. **What is Poetic Literature?**

Much of the OT is poetic in spirit and structure – we often find passages of elevated poetry, and the use of powerful imagery. One way in which you can quickly tell if Scripture is poetic is by noticing an overlooked feature in our English bibles. If you look at the book of Psalms, for example, you will see that the typeface and spacing is different to the rest of the books of the bible – as a result, you see wider margins. This is deliberate – the parallel lines help us to see the flow of the text, especially since Hebrew poetry is unlike English poetry in significant ways.

* 1. **Main Features of Poetic Literature**

The Hebrew language was an ideal instrument for expressing poetic speech. Its simplicity of form allowed for a combined intensity of feeling and pictorial power, and allowed great play of imagination. Some of the features we see are:

1. **Figures, metaphors, and hyperboles are extremely common**.

**Psalm 91**

**1**  The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice;

let the many coastlands be glad!

**2** Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;

righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

**3** Fire goes before him

and burns up his adversaries all around.

**4** His lightnings light up the world;

the earth sees and trembles.

**5** The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,

before the Lord of all the earth.

**II. The normal unit of Hebrew verse is the couplet of two parallel lines**.

Psalm 27:1

The Lord is my light and my salvation;

whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;

of whom shall I be afraid?

But this is not the only grouping of lines in Hebrew poetry. Units of three (Ps 1:1; 5:11; 45:1, 2), four (Ps 1:3; 55:21; Prv 27:15, 16), five (Ps 6:6, 7; Prv 24:23–25), six (Ps 99:1–3; Prv 30:21–23), and even larger combinations of parallel lines occur.

**III. As far as can be determined meter is absent from biblical poetry.**

Certainly there is little concern for the careful meter which marks classic Greek and Latin as well as much of English poetry. Rhyme also is so rare as to be almost nonexistent.

**IV. On the other hand, Hebrew poetry is rhythmical—one of its distinguishing features**.

Rhythm in Hebrew poetry, however, is not confined to the balance of accent or beat in a line. The meaning of the words and their position in the line are significant—a feature called parallelism – which I mentioned earlier.

There are three basic types of parallelism:

1. ***synonymous parallelism***, where the thought expressed in the first part of the verse is repeated in the second part, in different but equivalent terms.

The heavens declare the glory of God,

and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Ps 19:1

1. ***antithetic parallelism***, where the thought in the first part of the verse is contrasted with its opposite in the second.

The light of the righteous rejoices,

but the lamp of the wicked will be put out. Prv 13:9

1. ***synthetic parallelism***, where the idea expressed in the first line of a verse is developed and completed in the following lines.

**5**I lay down and slept;

I woke again, for the Lord sustained me.

**6**I will not be afraid of many thousands of people

who have set themselves against me all around. Ps 3:5, 6

**V. Acrostic**

Another characteristic of biblical poetry is the use of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalms in which verses are linked together by this means are called **acrostic.** Today, an acrostic is formed by taking a name and beginning the successive lines of the short poem with the letters that make up the name. The Hebrews took only the alphabet and arranged the lines of the poem according to the succession of the letters. (Ps 119 – turn there and show them)

\*\*Any Questions?\*\*

**Why poetry?**

Think about the many ways in which we can express ourselves through writing. We have at our disposal simple and vivid diction, figures of speech, experience, emotion, simile, metaphor, allegory, hyperbole, personification, irony, and wordplay. All of these and more serve to enhanced each biblical writer’s pattern of thinking. And ultimately, it serves us, by conveying to us greater meaning beyond simple facts.

Consider the information in the following statement:

Jesus Christ, who never sinned; died for sinners, to pay the penalty they deserved.

It’s a true statement.

Contrast that statement with Is 53:5-7:

**5** But he was pierced for our transgressions;

he was crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with his wounds we are healed.

**6** All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned—every one—to his own way;

and the Lord has laid on him

the iniquity of us all.

**7** He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,

yet he opened not his mouth;

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,

and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,

so he opened not his mouth.

It’s clear my writing doesn’t come close to the perfect Word of God, but do you see the point? The imagery of us like sheep wandering; of Jesus as a lamb led to slaughter; right down to the use of words like *pierced* and *crushed*, all convey far more information to us than a simple theological statement. They convey feeling, something tangible, something vivid and haunting – something worth remembering.

A case in point is the Psalms – the psalms were meant to be used for the purpose of worship.

They were to be sung with musical accompaniment. Many are private prayers, while others were composed for public worship, especially hymns of thanksgiving sung at the tabernacle or temple.

It is in the Psalter that the soaring spirit of Hebrew poetry rises to a level never achieved by Israel’s pagan neighbors; for the Hebrew worshiped God in spirit and in truth, and as he did so he was giving expression to a personal experience of the living God in his soul.

**Practical Exercise: Psalm 1**

We want to give ourselves the time now to look at a passage of the bible and do some bible study, so turn to Psalm 1.

Let’s start with:

Pray!

1. Observation (5 W’s; note the unique features – parallelism, imagery etc.)
2. Interpretation
3. Application

**The Way of the Righteous and the Wicked**

**1**Blessed is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,

nor stands in the way of sinners,

nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

**2** but his delight is in the law of the Lord,

and on his law he meditates day and night.

**3** He is like a tree

planted by streams of water

that yields its fruit in its season,

and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers.

**4** The wicked are not so,

but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

**5** Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

**6** for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish.