

Bible Overview 15 Wisdom Literature

The books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are referred to as ‘Wisdom Literature’. In general they focus on understanding living in a created but fallen world. The balance of understanding both creation and fall is a theme of all these books, with the conclusion that future redemption is our only hope. They are a ‘How to live when you’ve been on a Bible-overview course’ manual!

1. Job

Scene 1: 1:1-5: Job the righteous man (NB ‘Sinless’ and ‘blameless’ are not the same). Why?

Scene 2: 1:6-12 Satan allowed to test Job

What is Satan’s accusation?

What does this incident tell us about Satan (especially v 11-12)?

What mistake does this help guard against when considering suffering?

Scene 3: 1:3-22 Job’s property and children taken from him

1:20 Who does Job see behind his suffering?

Scene 4 & 5: 2:1-10 Satan allowed to harm Job, Job stays faithful

2:9-10 What is the temptation for Job?

Who does he see behind his suffering? Is he right?

Scene 5: 2:11-13 The Comforters Arrive

The Comforters’ message: A Clockwork Universe

The middle portion of the book is a series of dialogues, back and forth, between Job and his three comforters. Although there are three comforters there is really only one message. For example 4:7-8.

What is Eliphaz’s explanation for Job’s suffering?

Is he right? Why / why not?

‘Sin leads to Suffering.’ True or false?

‘Therefore Suffering is a result of sin.’ True or false?

‘Putting syrup instead of petrol in a car leads to a breakdown.’ True or false?

‘Therefore if you have a broken down car, you must have put syrup in it.’ True or false?

Suffering in the Bible can be the result of sin (e.g. 1Cor11:29-30), but **is by no means always** a result of sin. What is the prime example of this sinless suffering in the Bible?

1Peter 2:20, 3:14, 17-18.

The Comforters have subscribed to a clockwork / Karma like understanding where every suffering is caused by an evil deed. **They have forgotten they live in a fallen world, where everything does not run seamlessly.**

Job's Response

Job expresses some hope in his future vindication 19:25

He also demands an interview with God: 23:1-7

All the characters set selves up as source of wisdom: 11:12, 12:1-3, 13:12, 15:1-13 and ridicule other.

→ The question becomes not so much 'Why does God allow suffering?' as 'Who is wise?'

→ Implicitly God's goodness and justice are in question.

Finally after another round of dialogues, and a fourth friend's attempt to rebuke Job, God comes to answer, in one of the most magnificent passages of the Bible. It is also one of the longest speeches by God in the Bible.

Out of the Whirlwind: God's Response

38:1ff

What would we expect God to say after all these false accusations of Job? (remember ch1).

What does he say?

40:8 'Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?'

Job has forgotten that he lives in a created world, where he is not the all-powerful, all-wise one. God is higher, mightier, and wiser than him. He never finds out, fore example, about Satan's challenge.

Ch 42: Job repents and is restored.

1-6 Job repents and humbles himself. He was suffering innocently, but should not have questioned God.

7-9 Job becomes a righteous mediator for his friends.

V10-17 Job is restored.

The subtext in the 'Why does God allow suffering?' question is usually, 'Is God fair?' and 'Is God good?' What is the ultimate proof of the answer to both being 'Yes'?

Job, the innocent sufferer, points us on to Jesus, the sinless suffering servant, who becomes sinful for us, in order that he can restore us to God.

'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, in order that in him we might become the righteousness of God' 2 Cor 5:21

God is both good and just, but as we are created we cannot understand all his ways. And as we live in a fallen world, and are ourselves sinful, we will suffer until the Redeemer comes.

2. Proverbs

Proverbs is an instruction manual for young men learning to find their place in the world. It has no story or plot, but we must understand the rest of the Bible's story as taken for granted by the author. The short sayings are the most famous part of the book, but ch1-9 set the context and are vital.

Context: ch 1-9

1:1-7 It is impossible to be wise without knowing God. He is the starting point of everything. He is after all the one who created and rules the universe, so not to listen to what he has to say is the height of stupidity.

'Fear' is not a cringing terror, but a healthy respect for and submission to Yahweh.

Ch 9: Choose Your Girl

Wisdom and Folly are contrasted as two ladies calling out from the top of the highest hill in the town. In ancient middle eastern thought the god of the town lived on the highest place, so the contrast is between listening to the gods of folly or the Wisdom of the true God.

Some guidelines for reading Proverbs

1. Remember the Created world

→ So on the whole things run according to the pattern set by God

2. Remember the Fallen world

→ So things will not always work out as they should: don't 'absolutise' all proverbs.

3. Remember the whole Bible story

→ Jesus comes and saves: so ultimately there will be justice in eternal life.

4. Use your brain!

Discuss:

Try reading the following verses, and using the guidelines above work out what they might be saying. What lessons would you teach any young people you may know from these verses?

10:27, 11:8, 21, 11:22, 14:26, 17:12, 26:4-5

Proverbs as Guidance

The Bible speaks of God's will in 2 main ways:

1st: His 'Decretive' will. (The will that WILL happen).

Unbreakable: God is in complete control of the big things and the little.

Matthew 11: 29-30 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. ³⁰And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.'

This will is not fully revealed to us.

2nd His Preceptive Will (His moral desires)

‘God... wills that everyone reach repentance’ 1 Peter 3:9

Likewise it is God’s will that you don’t lie, cheat, steal, sin, dishonour him etc

This clearly can be broken.

It is clearly and fully revealed.

Often we ask the question, ‘What is God’s will for my life?’ without thinking through which ‘will’ we mean. If we mean his ‘Decretive’ hidden will, it is essentially a futile question: he’s probably not going to tell you! If we mean his preceptive will, then it is revealed fully in his word: God’s will is for us to love him with all our heart, love our neighbour, pray, give generously and all the rest. A useful verse is:

‘The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law’ Deuteronomy 29:29

BUT We are often then left asking ‘Is it God’s will for me to marry Jocasta, work at the yo-yo factory, live in Wellington Street?’ and so on. There are *no* promises in the Bible that you will get special guidance on these kinds of questions, in the form of a ‘direct’ answer. This is where the wisdom literature comes in. Given that we can’t read providence (God’s hidden Decretive will) but are trying to obey his revealed will, what would be a sensible choice. And then we read and **THINK!** This is not unspiritual: in the words of Proverbs it is ‘wise’.

So on Jocasta: Prov 11:22, 21:9, 31:10-31,

Can you go ‘outside’ God’s will for your life?

3. Ecclesiastes

A great book to read for today’s culture. The ‘Teacher’ or ‘Collector’ is meditates on life in a ‘god-less’ world. Therefore much of the book is not to be taken at face value: he is explaining what life is like without God, and without hope for eternity.

He tries turning his attention to different pursuits to find satisfaction, always with the same result:

1:12-8 Wisdom and knowledge

2:1-8 Wealth, women, home improvement, buildings, gardening, fashion, music.

2:18ff work

But death comes to all, and everything fades away: meaningless is literally ‘vapour’.

The conclusion is the key to the book. Another teacher comes and instructs his son on the conclusion of the matter.

12:13-14 Fear God and keep commandments: obedience
 God bring to judgment: future focus: Gospel.

Romans 8:20 frustration is same word as meaningless in Greek OT.

The world is pleasurable (it was created that way)

The world does not satisfy (It's not meant to: only because of the fall do we look to it instead of God)

Everything is meaningless and pointless without future hope.

4. Song of Songs

Unashamedly erotic in language, yet during the Middle Ages you could be excommunicated or worse for suggesting the book was about sex and love! The main debate is whether it is a metaphor for Jesus' love for the church, or a celebration of godly love and sex.

There are too many details for it to be purely a metaphor for God and his people.

Creation: Sex is good and to be fully enjoyed (in marriage). It is nothing to be ashamed of, hidden away, or seen as 'unspiritual'.

Fall: At the fall we started to seek satisfaction without God. This is wrong and will not work. Sex is a prime candidate for being 'worshipped'. 5:2-6:3 show the potential harm of 'love-sickness'.

Redemption & Future: Of course we know from the rest of the Bible that marriage and sex were created as a picture of God's jealous love and pleasure in his people. So the Song points us on, on one level, to think of the day when God and his people will be re-united. His passion for his bride is certainly not less than that of the two lovers.

'I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, dressed as a bride adorned for her husband.' Rev 21:2

God Moves In A Mysterious Way

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

William Cowper