

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

PSALMS (73-150)

St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

The Book of Proverbs takes its name from the Hebrew word *masal*, which means a “provocative saying” or maxim that gets people’s attention. Proverbs is a collection of these short sayings of the basic principles for leading a prudent and virtuous life. Such principles were considered the very foundation of a person’s education in ancient Israel, and also the preferred method of instruction. Because they are short and pithy, these sayings are easy to remember. For example, Jewish children were taught that the first letter of each line of Proverbs 31:10-31 begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The Book of Proverbs appears to be arranged randomly, but the main part of the book consists of two collections of proverbs specifically identified with King Solomon (chapters 10-22, 25-29). Many psalms are generally attributed to Solomon whose wisdom was known throughout the ancient world. Indeed, while Solomon did write numerous proverbs, the book is essentially a collection of sayings spanning many years, achieving its final form in the late 5th century B.C.

Purpose of Writing Proverbs

While knowledge is the accumulation of facts, wisdom is the ability to see people, events, and situations as God sees them. In this way Proverbs reveals the mind of God in matters sublime and ordinary. Personal conduct, sexual relations, business, wealth, debt, charity, ambition, discipline, child-rearing, character, alcohol, politics, revenge, and godliness are among the many topics covered in Proverbs.

While the wisdom of Proverbs may not be appreciated today, originally it was a kind of “handbook” for Jews to lead the virtuous life. In this way Proverbs anticipates moral theology; that is, teachings which are meant to guide one in right living so as to inherit eternal life.

The Divisions of Proverbs

The first part of Proverbs (chapters 1-9) is a summary of its essential point: “**Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom**” (1:7). Of course “fear” does not mean terror but reverence or awe. An uncontrollable emotional response to God’s power and majesty is not fear of the Lord; rather, to fear the Lord is something a person chooses: “. . . **they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord**” (1:29). To choose to “fear the Lord” is to recognize or submit to God’s moral authority and His truth, for without truth we cannot grow in wisdom. Proverbs therefore exhorts people to follow wisdom’s guidance, which means avoiding bad company, foolishness, hasty marriage, indolence and other vices. Terms that describe wisdom include, discipline, insight, instruction, prudence, vigilance, and righteousness.

The second part of Proverbs (chapters 10-22:16) includes a collection of Solomon’s maxims about life and morality, often in stark contrasts. For example, the righteous man works hard and makes good use of his earnings (10:16), whereas the man who rejects God indulges himself. Self-indulgence will never make a man happy because the more materialistic he becomes, the farther he moves away from God Who is the origin of all true happiness.

The third part (22:17-24:22) is a collection of “sayings of the wisemen.” These are various counsels on duties to one’s neighbor, and sayings on temperance and prudence (22:18-19).

The fourth part (24:23-34) is an appendix with more “sayings of the wisemen.” These proverbs also stress the malice of idleness.

The fifth part (25-29) is another collection of Solomon's proverbs featuring more comparisons and opposites.

The sixth part (30:1-33) features the sayings of Agur (an unknown sage), which describes the wisdom of God and man's mediocrity. These sayings are not written in proverb-style, but rather begin with a monologue, which at first is more a confession than a prayer.

The seventh part (31:1-9) contains three recommendations from a mother to her son, Lemuel (identity unknown), **"which his mother taught him"** (vs 1).

The eighth part (31:10-31) praises the virtues of the ideal wife who lacks not perfection or integrity. This part of Proverbs is different in style from the rest of the book in that it includes a prologue. It is a poem describing a wife's beauty as primarily the virtues which should adorn her—humility, strength, moral probity and trust in God. With these qualities and God's grace she can face the future with optimism, knowing that God will watch over her and her family because she is good. Indeed, all of society will benefit when mothers are faithful to their obligations.

Teachings

As discussed earlier, the Book of Proverbs is a sort of manual to teach people to live in accordance with the moral law – divine and human – and become good, honest and ultimately holy people. Proverbs examines wisdom and foolishness, riches and poverty, love and hate, work and idleness. It explores in depth the relationships between God and man, children and parents, king and subjects, husband and wife, master and servant, friend and enemy. The righteous man is the wise man who knows what life is about because his practical common sense enables him to form sound judgments.

As such, Proverbs is a series of moral values recommending fear of God, love of one's neighbor, charity, truthfulness, temperance, prudence, suffering in silence, and all the while being aware of God's providence. Yet Proverbs makes plain that it is not just personal effort that brings the wise man to the goal of happiness, but **"the blessing of the Lord makes rich"** (10:22).

Proverbs also presents wisdom as a *person*, that is, as feminine. In Hebrew as in many languages, most nouns are assigned a gender; however the gender is *grammatical* and does not necessarily indicate the actual physical gender of the object. For example, sailors usually refer to a ship as feminine: *She is a fine ship. Head her into port.* Because "soul" in Latin is feminine (*anima, -ae*), for centuries a person's soul was referred to as "she." In Hebrew "wisdom" is grammatically feminine; thus wisdom is spoken of in Psalms as "she."

The recurring principle of the Book of Proverbs is that those who choose wisdom and follow God will be blessed in numerous ways: with long life (9:11); prosperity (2:20-22); joy (3:13-18); and the goodness of God (12:21). Those who reject Him suffer shame and death (3:35; 10:21). To reject God is to choose folly over wisdom and to separate oneself from God, His Word, His wisdom, and His blessings.

The Psalms 73-150

The Book of Psalms is part of the Hebrew Bible known as the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles). "Psalm" is from the Greek *psalmos*, meaning "song accompanied by a stringed instrument." Psalm 150 exhorts Israel to **"Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his exceeding greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with flute and harp! Praise him with timbrel and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! That everything that breathes praise the Lord"** (Ps 150:1-6)!

The Book of Psalms has always been one of the most treasured books of the Hebrew Bible. Because the ancient Jews lived simple lives, even an elementary education in the books of the Hebrew Bible may have been too advanced for many of them. However the Psalms, rich in human emotion, were always read and enjoyed as a way to draw closer to God.

While other books of the Bible are God's messages to us, the Psalms are man's response to God. The psalms are still inspired Scripture, but they show how believers spoke to God in all kinds of circumstances.

By A.D. 1227, most books of the Bible were divided into chapters. The Book of Psalms is the only book in Sacred Scripture that does not have chapters. Instead of looking for "Psalm chapter 23," you simply find "Psalm 23" or "the twenty-third Psalm."

Book 3 – Collapse of the David's kingdom and covenant (73-89)

Book 3 is the "darkest" of the five books of the Psalter. Beginning with the first psalm of Book 3, the psalmist recalls how he almost lost his faith when he saw the wicked prosper at the expense of the upright (73). Book 3 contains more psalms of lament than anywhere else in the Psalter (74,79-80, 83, 85). As Book 3 is largely attributed to David, these psalms reflect distress and crisis for the whole of his kingdom. Indeed several of these psalms refer specifically to the sacking and/or destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Book 3 draws to a close with Psalm 88, the only lament psalm to end with neither praise nor an expression of confidence nor even a plaintive appeal, but ends with a sense of hopelessness. Conversely two-thirds of Psalm 89 is a hymn of praise to God for His evident power in creation and in His covenant with David. However it also soon changes back into a pathetic lament as the psalmist recounts the apparent disregard of God's promises and covenant with his anointed king (89:38). Here the mood of the Psalter reaches its lowest point. Book 3 ends with the heir of David shamed and humiliated (89), and his throne cast to the ground (Psalm 89:44).

Book 4 - Meditations from exile (90-106)

Book 4 is considered the "heart" of the Psalter because of the great continuity of themes among the seventeen psalms in this section. By Psalm 89, the Davidic monarchy and covenant seem to have ended and the people exiled. In the "absence" of David, the people turned to earlier covenant mediators for guidance. Thus Moses and Abraham appear in Book 4, though they had been largely absent beforehand. Psalm 90 is the only one attributed to Moses as he laments Israel in exile. Due to these terrible circumstances the emphasis is now on God Himself as "dwelling place" as "refuge" and "rock." Since the people of Israel have lost their land, capital, and Temple, in exile they must turn to God alone as their "dwelling place." The last three psalms recall God's mighty deeds in creation during the period from Abraham to the Exodus (104-105), and also the period from the Exodus to the exile (106). These psalms give a more or less complete recounting of salvation history; and always God's faithfulness is contrasted with Israel's unfaithfulness. Finally Book 4 recalls the failure of the Davidic kingdom and covenant, which results in Israel's exile. The Psalmist acknowledges Israel's sins and begs for her restoration.

Book 5 - Restoration of the Temple (107-150)

Book 5 begins with a thanksgiving psalm praising God for restoring His people from exile (107:1-3). It is the longest and structurally most complex books of the Psalter. It begins with David crying out for deliverance from his foes. Psalms 113-118 are known as the *hallel* psalms which were later recited during the Passover liturgy. In Psalm 116 and 118, the suffering servant of the Lord is delivered from death and exalted so that he is able to offer sacrifice in the Temple.

Next are fifteen "psalms of assent"—that is, pilgrimage psalms sung by worshipers in procession to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (120-34). In Psalm 133, the psalmist seems to enter the Temple courts where he witnesses the anointing of the high priest and then remains there all night, enjoying peaceful communion with the Lord in the intimacy of quiet darkness, singing praises to the Lord together with the priests who stand on

duty throughout the night (134:1-3). This section ends with two exuberant psalms to be chanted in the temple courts: a hymn of praise calling on priests and people to extol the Lord and give thanks (135-136).

From exuberant thanksgiving in Psalms 135 & 136, utter despair follows in Psalm 137 and its description of life in the Babylonian Exile. Here begins the longest series of Davidic psalms (138-145)—all a mix of praise and confidence in God's deliverance:

"Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

The Lord is faithful in all his works, and gracious in all his deeds" (145:10-13).

The Psalter come to an end with an eschatological flourish that will become increasingly important in the life of ancient Israel and early Christianity: the hope for the glorious "kingdom" of God. After lifting up this hymn in praise of God's kingdom (145), the remaining five psalms are a kind of finale that ends with words of praise for God and His many blessings.

The *Hallel* of the Psalms and *alleluia*.

Hallel translates "praise" and occurs twenty-four times in the Psalms. *Hallel* is also the collective name for six psalms, 113-118, which are recited or sung with morning prayers and during major holy days such as Passover and Hannukah. These psalms are expressions of joy and faith in God, and of gratitude for salvation from Israel's enemies. They were incorporated into the Book of Psalms by King David, and were singled out for inclusion in *hallel* because they contain the fundamental themes of the faith of Judaism: the Exodus, the Giving of the Ten Commandments or Torah, the future Resurrection of the Dead, and the Coming of the Messiah. The *hallel* was also the likely hymn that Jesus and His disciples sang at the conclusion of the Passover supper in the Upper Room (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26).

Psalm 113

"He raises the poor from the dust, lifts up the needy from the refuse heap to set them with the great, with the great men of His people."

Psalm 116

"How can I repay the LORD for all His bounties to me?

I raise the cup of deliverance and invoke the name of the LORD."

Psalm 118

"In distress I called on the LORD; the Lord answered me and brought me relief.

The LORD is on my side, I have no fear; what can man do to me?"

Today the *hallel* is recited or sung at celebrations of thanksgiving (e.g., Israel Independence Day), special events, and major military victories. Over time *hallel* became "hallelujah" (*halelū yāh*), which means "praise ye Jah!" "Yah" or "Jah" in Hebrew is a shortened form of Yahweh or Jehovah. During the time of the Temple, Levite priests stood before the altar of sacrifice and chanted the psalms of praise verse by verse, the people responding by repeating the verses or by intoning hallelujahs. "Alleluia" is from the Greek transliteration of the same. Because the word *hallel* itself contains the name of God (-el), Jews do not use it in casual conversation.

"Because He is your Lord, worship Him."

Psalm 45:11