COGMA

Church of God Mission Academy

STUDY GUIDE 7

Understanding *the* Bible

STUDY GUIDE 4 OF 8:

Wisdom and Poetry — Worship, Wisdom and Life

An overview of wisdom, worship and everyday life.



Equipping and empowering for effective service

2 Timothy 2:2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENT

My Study Plan

Preparing a Study Plan before starting this Study Guide will assist you in completing it within a designated timeframe. It also helps in developing the discipline required for studying God's Word effectively.

Proverbs 16:3:

> *Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.*

My Study Guide Journal

Keep a record as you progress through your Study Guide, including the Personal Responses for each section, for future reference and goal setting.

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Important Points

- COGMA does not claim to be infallible or the authority.
- Infallibility and authority belong only to God and His Word.

COGMA therefore strongly advises that you prayerfully study the content of each Study Guide with the heart of a Berean (**Acts 17:10–12**).

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PREFACE

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The previous Study Guide followed Israel's history from the entrance into Canaan through the period of the judges, the monarchy, the divided kingdoms, captivity and restoration. We now turn from the continuing historical account to a different form of biblical writing: the Books of Wisdom and Poetry.

These five books are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. Although they differ greatly in subject and style, together they explore some of the deepest experiences and questions of human life, including suffering, worship, wisdom, love, purpose, sorrow, hope and our relationship with God.

Poetry is found throughout the Old Testament, not only within these five books. Scripture uses songs, prayers, laments, proverbs and other poetic forms to communicate truth in ways that are memorable, expressive and deeply personal.

Understanding how Hebrew poetry works will therefore help us read these books more carefully. We will consider features such as parallelism, where one line may repeat, explain, develop or contrast the thought expressed in another line.

Each of the five books contributes something distinctive. Job confronts suffering and the limits of human understanding. Psalms gives expression to worship, prayer, praise, sorrow and trust. Proverbs provides practical wisdom for everyday life. Ecclesiastes examines the meaning and purpose of life. Song of Solomon celebrates love, devotion and relationship.

These writings were not preserved simply because of their literary beauty. They contain wisdom that instructs, comforts, challenges and strengthens God's people through the changing circumstances of life.

Most importantly, we will continue to keep Jesus Christ at the centre of our understanding of Scripture. The wisdom, worship, hope and spiritual truths contained within these books form part of the continuing biblical testimony that ultimately directs us towards Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can wisdom, worship, and hope direct our attention towards Jesus Christ?

Personal Reflection

Which of these do you most need in your life at present?

Action Step

Choose a verse from the Wisdom Books that directs you to Jesus. What need in your own heart does it reveal, and how will you respond?

INTRODUCTION: WISDOM, POETRY AND THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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The Books of Wisdom and Poetry occupy a distinctive place within the Old Testament. The Historical Books mainly record what happened to Israel across generations, while these

writings often turn our attention inward towards the experiences, questions, prayers, struggles and choices of individuals seeking to understand life before God.

The five books are:

- Job;
- Psalms;
- Proverbs;
- Ecclesiastes;
- Song of Solomon.

These books are sometimes called the Books of Wisdom, the Books of Poetry or the Books of Literature. These descriptions reflect the way they use poetic language, songs, proverbs, reflection and carefully constructed expressions to communicate spiritual truth.

Wisdom Is Skill for Living

Biblical wisdom is not simply possessing large amounts of information. Wisdom concerns knowing how to live rightly before God and applying truth to the circumstances of everyday life.

Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 1:7**:

> *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction."*

The starting point for true wisdom is therefore our relationship with God. Human intelligence, education and experience may have value, but Scripture places the fear of the LORD at the foundation of genuine knowledge and wisdom.

These books address subjects that touch every generation. They speak about suffering, family, friendship, work, speech, temptation, worship, sorrow, joy, love, uncertainty, ageing, death and the purpose of life.

Poetry Communicates Truth Through Experience

Poetry allows truth to be expressed not only as instruction but also through emotion, imagery and personal experience. The Psalms, for example, allow us to hear people praising God, crying to Him during trouble, confessing sin, expressing fear and declaring renewed confidence in His faithfulness.

Poetic expression is not limited to these five books. Songs, prayers, riddles and poetic verses appear throughout the Old Testament, including the Song of Moses, Hannah's prayer and Samson's riddle.

This reminds us that God used different forms of writing to communicate His truth.

Wisdom Given by God

The wisdom found within these books continually directs people away from confidence in themselves and towards dependence upon God. Job discovers the limitations of human understanding, the Psalms repeatedly turn towards God in every circumstance, Proverbs

teaches the fear of the LORD, and Ecclesiastes exposes the emptiness of seeking lasting satisfaction only in earthly things.

Even the deepest questions of human experience cannot finally be answered by human wisdom alone.

As we study these books, we will therefore consider both how the poetry communicates and what spiritual truth it communicates. We will learn to recognise features of Hebrew poetry while following the larger message concerning worship, wisdom, suffering, love and life before God.

Above all, these writings form part of the same Scriptural testimony we have been following throughout this module. Their wisdom and hope ultimately prepare us to understand more fully the truth revealed in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why do wisdom and poetry speak to both daily choices and deep human experience?

Personal Reflection

What part of your own life needs wisdom that comes from God?

Action Step

Identify a decision needing God's wisdom. Which verse will guide you, and what change will you make in that decision?

UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF WISDOM AND POETRY

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The five books we are about to study are commonly grouped together as the Books of Wisdom and Poetry:

- Job;
- Psalms;
- Proverbs;
- Ecclesiastes;
- Song of Solomon.

They are also sometimes described as the Books of Literature because they contain some of the Bible's most expressive forms of writing. They include poetry, songs, prayers, proverbs, reflections, conversations and carefully constructed statements of wisdom.

Although these books are grouped together, they are not all written in exactly the same way. Psalms contains songs and prayers, Proverbs consists largely of short statements of wisdom, Job includes extended poetic conversations, Ecclesiastes reflects upon the meaning of life, and Song of Solomon is written as a continuing poem or love song.

What brings them together is their concern with wisdom, worship and the experiences of life before God.

Wisdom Concerns How We Live

Biblical wisdom is practical. It is not simply the ability to accumulate facts or understand difficult subjects. Wisdom concerns knowing how to live and making choices that agree with God's truth.

Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 1:7**:

> *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction."*

The foundation of wisdom is therefore *"the fear of the LORD."*

The wisdom found in Scripture begins with recognising God, honouring His authority and being willing to receive His instruction. A person may possess great natural intelligence and still make foolish spiritual choices if God is excluded from the way he thinks and lives.

For this reason, the Books of Wisdom speak directly to everyday experience. They address questions concerning suffering, relationships, speech, work, family, temptation, sorrow, joy, love, purpose and the choices we make.

Poetry Is Found Throughout the Old Testament

Hebrew poetry is not confined to these five books. Poetic verses appear throughout the Old Testament wherever songs, prayers, laments, riddles and other forms of expression are used.

For example, **Genesis 4:23-24** records the poetic words of Lamech. Exodus 15 contains the Song of Moses after Israel crossed the Red Sea. **1 Samuel 2:1-10** records Hannah's prayer, while **Judges 14:12-14** contains Samson's riddle.

Understanding biblical poetry will therefore help us beyond the five books considered in this Study Guide.

God used different forms of writing to communicate His truth. A historical account tells us what happened. A command tells us what should be done. A proverb expresses wisdom briefly, while a song or prayer may communicate truth through praise, sorrow, longing, gratitude or hope.

These Books Speak to the Human Experience

One reason these writings have remained meaningful across generations is that the human experiences they describe are still familiar.

Job asks questions that arise during severe suffering. The Psalms express joy, fear, praise, repentance, loneliness and confidence in God. Proverbs addresses the practical decisions of daily life.

Ecclesiastes asks what gives human life lasting meaning, while Song of Solomon speaks of love and devotion.

These are not distant subjects. They concern experiences faced by people in every generation.

Wisdom Must Remain Centred Upon God

Other ancient cultures also produced writings concerned with wisdom, but biblical wisdom continually places God at the centre. Life cannot be properly understood by removing the Creator from His creation.

The Books of Wisdom therefore do more than teach people how to become successful, thoughtful or well behaved. They continually bring us back to our relationship with God and the truth He has revealed.

As we study them, we must pay attention both to what is being said and how it is being expressed. Hebrew poetry often communicates through relationships between lines and thoughts rather than through the rhyme patterns familiar in much modern poetry.

Understanding that method will prepare us to read these books more carefully. We will therefore next examine Hebrew poetry, parallelism and the different ways poetic lines work together to communicate truth.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why should these books be read for their teaching as well as their strong feelings?

Personal Reflection

Have you overlooked a truth because it was expressed as poetry or song?

Action Step

Read a Psalm or proverb you have overlooked. What truth does its poetic form bring home to you personally?

HEBREW POETRY: LANGUAGE, PARALLELISM AND EXPRESSION

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Before examining Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon individually, it is helpful to understand something about Hebrew poetry. Much of the poetry found in the Old Testament communicates truth differently from ordinary historical writing, yet its purpose remains the same: to reveal truth in a form that can be understood, remembered and applied.

Biblical poetry is not limited to these five books. It appears throughout the Old Testament in songs, prayers, laments, proverbs and even riddles. God used poetic expression to communicate truth through many different circumstances and human experiences.

Poetry Appears Throughout the Old Testament

Some of the earliest poetry appears in **Genesis 4:23-24**, where Lamech speaks in poetic form. Later, after Israel crossed the Red Sea, Moses and the children of Israel expressed their deliverance through the great song recorded in Exodus 15.

Poetry also appears in prayer. **1 Samuel 2:1-10** records Hannah's prayer after God answered her concerning Samuel, while **Judges 14:12-14** records Samson using a riddle. These examples show that poetry could communicate sorrow, celebration, prayer, teaching or a carefully constructed thought.

The important point is that poetry was not added to Scripture simply for decoration. It provided another way of communicating spiritual truth and human experience.

Songs, Teaching and Reflection

Different books use poetry for different purposes. Psalms contains songs and prayers, while Proverbs uses poetry largely for teaching wisdom concerning life and conduct.

Poetry can therefore express both what a person feels and what a person needs to learn. A Psalm may communicate grief, confidence, worship or thanksgiving, while a proverb may communicate an important principle in only a few carefully chosen words.

This variety helps explain why the Books of Wisdom and Poetry can speak so directly to human experience. Their language often takes truth and places it into expressions that can be remembered and carried into everyday life.

Hebrew Poetry Does Not Depend Mainly Upon Rhyme

Much modern English poetry is recognised by rhyme, rhythm or repeated patterns of sound. Hebrew poetry generally works differently.

Psalms and Proverbs do not usually depend upon words rhyming at the ends of lines. Instead, Hebrew poetry frequently creates a relationship between thoughts.

One line expresses an idea. The following line may then:

- Repeat it;
- Explain it further;
- Develop its consequence;
- Contrast it with an opposite idea.

This important feature is called parallelism. Rather than depending primarily upon word rhyme, Hebrew poetry often uses what might be called thought rhyme.

Understanding this greatly helps us read the Psalms, Proverbs and other poetic verses.

Parallelism: One Thought Working With Another

Parallelism occurs when two lines are deliberately connected. The second line does not simply fill space. It helps us understand, strengthen or develop the thought expressed in the first.

Sometimes the second line says much the same thing using different words. At other times, it develops the first statement, shows its result or presents a contrast.

We therefore need to learn to ask: How does the second thought relate to the first?

That question can help us recognise what the writer is emphasising.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does Hebrew poetry communicate thought without depending mainly on rhyme?

Personal Reflection

Have you misunderstood a verse because you overlooked how its two lines belong together?

Action Step

Read two connected lines of a Psalm. What mistaken understanding might change when you take both thoughts together?

The Second Line Can Explain the First

A clear example appears in **Psalm 119:105**:

> *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."*

The first expression is *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet,"* while the second is *"and a light unto my path."*

Both expressions communicate the same central truth: God's Word provides light and guidance. The second expression restates and develops the first. The picture moves from a lamp illuminating the feet to light showing the path ahead.

The writer is not presenting two unrelated ideas. He is using two connected pictures to strengthen one truth: God's Word gives direction.

This is one of the great strengths of parallelism. The second line allows us to look at the same truth from another angle.

The Second Line Can Show the Result

Another form can be seen in **Psalm 23:1**:

> *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

The first statement gives the foundation: *"The LORD is my shepherd."* The second describes the result: *"I shall not want."*

The two thoughts belong together. Because the LORD is the shepherd, the Psalmist expresses confidence in His care and provision.

The second line therefore does more than repeat the first. It shows the consequence of the relationship described in the first line.

We can think of the movement simply as:

Cause → Effect

The LORD is my shepherd → I shall not want.

Recognising this relationship helps us understand the thought more clearly.

The Second Line Can Present a Contrast

Parallelism can also work through contrast. **Psalm 30:5** states:

> *"For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."*

Notice the contrasts within the verse:

Anger → favour

Weeping → joy

The ideas are placed beside one another so that the difference becomes more powerful. The Psalmist first contrasts the temporary nature of anger with the life found in God's favour. He then uses the picture of night and morning to contrast weeping with joy.

The poetic structure strengthens the message because the first idea is placed beside another that reveals its contrast. The result is memorable: *"weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."*

The second thought therefore helps us understand the first by showing its opposite or contrast.

Thought Rhyme Makes Truth Memorable

These examples show why Hebrew poetry can remain powerful even when translated from Hebrew into another language. Its beauty is not dependent only upon words sounding alike.

The relationship between the thoughts can still be recognised:

Statement → explanation

Cause → effect

One idea → contrasting idea

This is why the expression *"thought rhyme"* is helpful. The connection lies primarily in the relationship between the ideas rather than the similarity of the sounds.

Parallelism can therefore emphasise a truth, explain it more clearly, develop it or make a contrast more memorable.

Read the Lines Together

When reading Hebrew poetry, we should resist the temptation to isolate every line as though it stands entirely by itself. Often the full meaning becomes clearer when we consider how neighbouring lines work together.

We should ask:

- What thought is being introduced?
- Does the next line repeat it?
- Does it explain or develop it?
- Does it show a consequence?
- Does it present a contrast?

Reading this way helps us follow the movement of the writer's thought rather than treating poetry as a collection of disconnected sayings.

Hebrew poetry therefore gives us another important way in which God communicated His truth. Through songs, prayers, teaching, reflection and parallel thoughts, spiritual truths were

expressed in forms that could speak to the mind, the heart and the experiences of everyday life.

With this foundation in place, we are ready to begin the first of the five Books of Wisdom and Poetry: Job, a book that confronts suffering, faith and the limits of human understanding.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why should you notice how parallel lines add to or deepen one thought?

Personal Reflection

How does reading a Psalm's complete thought challenge the way you have previously understood it?

Action Step

Choose a short Psalm and follow its connected thoughts. What will you change in your own prayer or trust because of its message?

JOB: SUFFERING, FAITH AND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

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Approximate Historical Setting: c. 1900 B.C., during the Patriarchal period
Approximate Date of Writing: c. 1900 B.C., writer unknown
Place in the Biblical Story: Job examines suffering, faith, human reasoning and trust in God

Job is the first of the five Books of Wisdom and Poetry and contains forty-two chapters. The book tells the story of a man who experienced extraordinary suffering and then wrestled with questions that human wisdom could not fully answer.

The name Job has been associated with the idea of a *"persecuted one,"* which is appropriate to the suffering described throughout the book. Job has also long been recognised for the remarkable poetic form through which many of its questions, arguments and spiritual lessons are expressed.

The book raises one of the oldest and most difficult questions in human experience: Why do people suffer, especially when they do not understand the reason? Job does not give us a shallow answer. Instead, it shows the limits of human understanding and the importance of continuing to trust God when answers are incomplete.

The Movement of the Book

The story develops through several major stages. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce Job, his blessings and the terrible trials that suddenly come upon him, while chapters 3 through 37 contain the extended conversations between Job and those who attempt to explain his suffering.

From chapter 38 onward, God answers Job and confronts the limitations of human understanding. Chapter 42 brings the book to its conclusion, including Job's humility before God and his eventual restoration.

Job Was a Righteous Man

The book begins by describing Job's character. **Job 1:1** states:

> *"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil."*

Job is therefore not introduced as a wicked man whose suffering can simply be explained as punishment for obvious sin. He is described as *"perfect and upright,"* as one who *"feared God,"* and as one who *"eschewed evil."*

This becomes important because much of the argument that follows concerns whether Job's suffering proves that he must have done something wrong. His friends repeatedly try to explain his suffering in this way, but they do not understand everything that is taking place.

Job Loses Almost Everything

Job 1 records a series of devastating losses. His possessions are taken, servants are killed, and finally the terrible news comes that his sons and daughters have died.

Job's response is remarkable. **Job 1:20-22** states:

> *"Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly."*

Job grieved deeply, but grief did not cause him to turn against God. His suffering was real and his sorrow was real, yet Scripture records that *"Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly."*

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why is Job's suffering not proof that he had done a secret wrong?

Personal Reflection

How do you respond when a faithful person suffers and you do not know why?

Action Step

Think of someone suffering without an obvious reason. What assumption will you stop making, and how will you show care instead?

Job's Physical Suffering

Job's suffering then became personal and physical. He was afflicted with painful sores, and even his wife urged him to abandon his integrity.

Job 2:9-10 states:

> *"Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die. But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips."*

Again, Job refused to speak against God. This does not mean that he never struggled, because the chapters that follow contain deep sorrow, difficult questions and moments in which Job cannot understand what God is allowing.

The book does not present faith as pretending that suffering does not hurt. It presents a man who continues turning towards God even while he struggles to understand what is happening.

Job's Friends Try to Explain His Suffering

Three friends came to Job: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. At first they sat with him in silence, but eventually long conversations began as they attempted to explain why Job was suffering.

Their reasoning repeatedly moved in the same direction: God is just, therefore Job's suffering must prove that he has committed some hidden wrong. Eliphaz expressed this reasoning in **Job 4:7-8**:

> *"Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off? Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same."*

There is truth in the principle that wrongdoing has consequences, but Job's friends applied that principle too simply. They could not see everything that was happening, yet they spoke as though they fully understood the cause of Job's suffering.

This becomes one of the important lessons of the book: Human reasoning is limited, especially when we attempt to explain another person's suffering without knowing everything God knows.

Job Maintains His Integrity

Job refused to accept accusations that he knew were false. **Job 27:5-6** states:

> *"God forbid that I should justify you: till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live."*

Job's friends kept searching for an explanation that placed the cause of his suffering upon some hidden wrongdoing. Job continued insisting that their explanation did not fit what he knew to be true.

The debate therefore exposes how easily people can speak confidently about matters they do not fully understand. Wisdom sometimes requires us to recognise the limits of what we know.

"When He Hath Tried Me"

In the midst of his suffering, Job expresses confidence that God knows where he is. **Job 23:10** states:

> *"But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."*

Job could not see everything, but he believed that God could. His words reveal confidence that the trial was not outside God's knowledge.

Suffering can therefore become a place of spiritual growth rather than spiritual destruction. It may expose weakness, deepen dependence upon God and provide a testimony of faith to others, even when the person passing through the trial does not yet understand its purpose.

The important words are *"he knoweth the way that I take."* Job did not know the whole explanation, but he believed that God knew him and knew the path through which he was passing.

Job Longs for an Answer

Throughout the book, Job asks questions that reveal his desire to understand both his suffering and his relationship with God. At one point, he longs for someone who could stand between God and man.

Job 9:32-33 states:

> *"For he is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, and we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any daysman betwixt us, that might lay his hand upon us both."*

Later, Job makes another remarkable declaration in **Job 19:25-27**:

> *"For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me."*

These words reach beyond Job's immediate suffering. He speaks of a living Redeemer, and the continuing revelation of Scripture ultimately brings us to Jesus Christ, in whom redemption is fully revealed.

Many of the deepest questions raised in Job therefore direct us beyond human wisdom. Their fullest answer is found in Jesus Christ.

God Answers Job

Eventually God speaks. **Job 38:1-4** states:

> *"Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding."*

God does not begin by providing Job with a simple explanation of every event. Instead, He confronts the limitations of human understanding by asking questions concerning creation and things far beyond Job's knowledge.

The lesson is not that people must never ask questions. The lesson is that we must recognise the difference between what God knows and what we know.

We may know what has happened without understanding everything concerning why it has happened. Faith must therefore rest upon God rather than upon our ability to explain every circumstance.

Job Is Humbled Before God

After hearing God, Job recognises how limited his own understanding has been. **Job 42:1-6** states:

> *"Then Job answered the LORD, and said, I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."*

Job's suffering had produced many questions, but his final response is humility before God. He acknowledges, *"I have uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not."*

This is one of the central lessons of Job. Faith does not require us to understand everything before we trust God, but it does require humility concerning the limits of our own understanding.

Job Is Restored

The book closes with restoration. **Job 42:10** states:

> *"And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before."*

Job's latter years were blessed, and his suffering did not become the final chapter of his life. The restoration does not erase what he endured, but it demonstrates that his trial was not the end of his story.

Job therefore leaves us with several important lessons:

- Suffering cannot always be explained by simple human reasoning;
- We should be careful before judging why another person is suffering;
- Trials can contribute to spiritual growth;
- Faith during suffering can become a testimony to others;
- God knows what we cannot see;
- Human understanding has limits;
- Faith can remain even when answers are incomplete;
- Our deepest questions ultimately direct us towards Jesus Christ, our living Redeemer.

Job begins with a man whose life is suddenly overwhelmed by suffering, but it ends with a man brought into a deeper recognition of God's greatness and the limitations of his own understanding.

The next book, Psalms, takes us further into the language of human experience, giving expression to worship, prayer, sorrow, repentance, trust and praise.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What did Job learn when God answered him without explaining every cause?

Personal Reflection

Where do you need to trust God while admitting that your understanding is limited?

Action Step

Read God's answer to Job. What demand for immediate answers must you surrender, and how will you show trust amid uncertainty?

PSALMS: WORSHIP, PRAYER, PRAISE AND THE MESSIAH

BACK TO CONTENTS

Approximate Historical Setting: From c. 1450 B.C. through the period after the Babylonian captivity

Approximate Period of Composition: From the time of Moses through David, Solomon and later generations

Place in the Biblical Story: A collection of songs, prayers and spiritual reflections expressing worship, sorrow, repentance, trust, hope and praise before God

Psalms is the second of the five Books of Wisdom and Poetry and contains 150 Psalms. Unlike a book written by one person at one time, Psalms is a collection formed across many generations. Its contributors include Moses, David and Solomon, together with other writers whose Psalms were preserved within the collection.

Some Psalms therefore come from very early periods of Israel's history, while others belong to later generations. This long period of composition helps explain why the book contains such a wide range of circumstances, emotions and experiences.

A Book of Songs and Praise

The Hebrew title associated with Psalms carries the idea of songs of praise, while the Greek title is connected with songs set to music. The book therefore served as a great collection of worship, prayer and praise among the people of Israel.

Many Psalms were sung in connection with worship. They gave God's people words through which they could express thanksgiving, confidence, sorrow, repentance, longing and joy.

The Psalms show that worship is not limited to moments when life is easy. People praised God during blessing, but they also cried to Him during danger, loneliness, persecution and uncertainty.

This gives the Psalms their continuing power. They speak to people who are rejoicing, but they also speak to people who are hurting.

The Psalms Speak From the Heart

The Psalms deal with many different subjects, including:

- The nation of Israel;
- The created world;

- The coming Messiah;
- Sorrow for sin;
- Trust in God;
- God's blessings;
- Prayer in trouble;
- Thanksgiving and praise.

Because of this variety, the Psalms often read like the language of the heart. The writers do not hide fear, disappointment, grief or confusion, but neither do they remain centred upon those feelings.

Again and again, the Psalmist turns towards God. One of the clearest examples appears in **Psalm 42:11**:

> *"Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God."*

The Psalmist acknowledges that his soul is cast down, but he also speaks truth to himself: *"hope thou in God."*

The Psalms therefore show us that faith does not require pretending that sorrow does not exist. Faith turns towards God in the midst of sorrow.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do the Psalms give words for prayer and praise in different circumstances?

Personal Reflection

Which feeling have you found hard to bring honestly before God?

Action Step

Choose a Psalm that expresses a feeling you have hidden. What will you bring honestly before God in prayer this week?

The LORD Is My Shepherd

Perhaps one of the best-known Psalms is Psalm 23. David wrote in **Psalm 23:1-4**:

> *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."*

The Psalm does not say that the believer will never walk through dark valleys. Instead, the confidence is found in the words *"thou art with me."*

The shepherd image expresses care, guidance, provision and protection. David's confidence does not rest upon the absence of danger, but upon the presence and faithfulness of God.

Psalms of Repentance

The Psalms also give language to repentance. After serious sin, David cried to God in **Psalm 51:10-12**:

> *"Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit."*

David does not attempt to excuse his condition. He recognises his need for cleansing and restoration.

The Psalms therefore teach us that genuine worship includes honesty before God. Praise and repentance are not opposites. A person who truly honours God must also be willing to acknowledge sin and seek His mercy.

Creation and the Works of God

The Psalms also direct attention towards the created world. Nature is not presented simply as scenery, but as something that causes the writer to consider the greatness of the Creator and the place of humanity within His creation.

David wrote in **Psalm 8:3-4**:

> *"When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?"*

The movement of the thought is significant. David looks at the heavens and then considers himself. The greatness of creation produces humility rather than pride.

This is another example of how poetry communicates truth through experience. The writer does not simply state that God is great. He looks at the heavens, reflects upon what God has made and then asks what place man has before such a Creator.

Trust During Trouble

Many Psalms arise from circumstances of danger and distress. They do not deny the reality of trouble, but they repeatedly direct confidence back towards God.

Psalm 46:1-3 states:

> *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah."*

The Psalm does not promise that nothing frightening will happen. Instead, it establishes the reason for confidence before describing the danger: *"God is our refuge and strength."*

That order matters. Circumstances may be unstable, but confidence rests in God rather than in circumstances.

This helps explain why the Psalms have brought comfort during many kinds of suffering. Their message is not that faith removes every difficult experience. Their message is that God remains the refuge of His people within those experiences.

The Word of God in the Psalms

The Psalms also express deep love for God's Word. Psalm 119 is especially important because of its repeated emphasis upon the commandments, statutes, testimonies and Word of God.

Psalm 119:105 states:

> *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."*

The verse uses poetic parallelism to present one central truth through two connected images. God's Word gives light for the next step and direction for the path ahead.

Psalm 119 is also a notable example of an acrostic Psalm. Its sections follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet, a structure that may have assisted memory while also giving the Psalm a deliberate literary form.

This shows that Hebrew poetry could be both spiritually expressive and carefully constructed.

Selah: Pause and Consider

Many Psalms contain the word Selah. It has traditionally been understood as an indication to pause, reflect or consider what has just been expressed.

Whether connected with music, worship or reflection, its presence reminds the reader not to rush through the Psalms. Some truths are meant to be considered carefully.

The Psalms are therefore not simply writings to be read quickly. Their language invites meditation, prayer and personal response.

Five Divisions Within Psalms

The book of Psalms has traditionally been divided into five books. These five divisions have often been compared with the five Books of the Law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The divisions are:

- Psalms 1–41 — The Genesis Book: Psalms concerning man, with the thought that God is near us;
- Psalms 42–72 — The Exodus Book: Psalms concerning Israel as a nation, with the thought that God goes before us;
- Psalms 73–89 — The Leviticus Book: Psalms concerning the sanctuary, with the thought that God surrounds us;
- Psalms 90–106 — The Numbers Book: Psalms concerning Israel and the nations, with the thought that God is above us;
- Psalms 107–150 — The Deuteronomy Book: Psalms concerning God and His Word, with the thought that God is among us.

This fivefold arrangement provides an internal structure within the larger collection of 150 Psalms. It also creates an interesting relationship between the Psalms and the five Books of Moses that form the opening division of the Old Testament.

The comparison helps the student see broad movements within Psalms rather than viewing the book as an unordered collection of individual songs. The subjects range from humanity

and Israel to worship, the sanctuary, the nations, God's Word and the continuing relationship of God's people with Him.

The final division, Psalms 107–150, brings the collection increasingly towards praise, until the book closes with the great declaration:

"Let everything that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD."

Let Every Thing Praise the LORD

The book ends with one of Scripture's strongest calls to praise. **Psalm 150:1-6** states:

> *"Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power. Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness. Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals. Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD."*

The final words of the collection are *"Praise ye the LORD."*

After sorrow, fear, repentance, questions, worship and trust, Psalms ends in praise.

Psalms Were Used in Worship

The Psalms were not written only for private reading. They formed part of Israel's worship and were sung by God's people in different settings, including journeys connected with worship and later periods of restoration.

The New Testament also shows that Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs continued to have an important place among believers.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 5:19**:

> *"Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;"*

James also wrote in **James 5:13**:

> *"Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms."*

Notice the two circumstances James mentions. When a person is afflicted, pray. When a person is merry, sing Psalms.

The life of faith therefore includes both prayer in trouble and praise in joy.

Psalms Concerning the Messiah

The Psalms do more than express personal experience. They also form part of the Old Testament testimony concerning the coming Messiah.

Jesus made this clear in **Luke 24:44**:

> *"And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me."*

Jesus specifically included *"the psalms"* among the Scriptures containing things concerning Him.

This means that we must not read Psalms only as David's experiences, Israel's worship or expressions of human emotion. Within the Psalms is also a continuing testimony that leads towards Jesus Christ.

The same book that teaches us how to pray, praise and trust also forms part of the Scriptural revelation of the Messiah.

A Personal Relationship With God

One of the strongest impressions left by Psalms is the deeply personal nature of the writers' relationship with God.

The Psalmists speak of *"my God," "my shepherd," "my refuge," "my strength"* and *"my salvation."* They do not speak only about God in distant terms. They address Him, cry to Him, trust Him and praise Him.

This personal relationship does not remove reverence. The same writers who speak personally with God also recognise His holiness, greatness and authority.

The Psalms therefore show that a relationship with God includes reverence, trust, honesty, repentance, dependence, thanksgiving and praise.

The Continuing Value of Psalms

Across generations, the Psalms have given believers words for circumstances in which they may have struggled to find words of their own. In joy they provide praise. In sorrow they provide prayer. In repentance they provide confession. In uncertainty they provide reminders of God's faithfulness.

Their strength lies partly in the breadth of human experience they contain. The person reading Psalms can encounter fear, confidence, grief, hope, loneliness, worship and joy, yet again and again the direction turns back towards God.

The Psalms therefore teach us not simply how people once worshipped, but how completely life can be brought before God. Nothing in human experience needs to be hidden from Him, and every circumstance can become an occasion to seek, trust or praise Him.

Most importantly, Psalms does not end with human emotion. Its testimony ultimately directs us towards Jesus Christ, the One of whom the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms testify.

The next book, Proverbs, moves from the language of worship and prayer into concentrated instruction concerning wisdom for everyday living.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do the Psalms lead worshippers towards the promised Messiah?

Personal Reflection

How does a Psalm about the Messiah change the way you know and trust Jesus Christ?

Action Step

Read a Psalm pointing to the Messiah. How will what it reveals about Jesus change your confidence in Him?

PROVERBS: WISDOM FOR EVERYDAY LIVING

BACK TO CONTENTS

Approximate Historical Setting: c. 970-675 B.C.

Approximate Period of Composition: Beginning particularly with Solomon and continuing through later contributors

Place in the Biblical Story: Practical wisdom showing how truth should guide the choices, attitudes and conduct of everyday life

Proverbs is the third of the five Books of Wisdom and Poetry and contains thirty-one chapters. Solomon is the principal writer associated with the book, although other contributors were also involved in the collection of its wisdom.

Unlike the extended suffering and conversations found in Job or the songs and prayers of Psalms, Proverbs communicates much of its teaching through short, carefully expressed statements of wisdom. These sayings are intended to be remembered, considered and applied to the practical circumstances of life.

The purpose is not simply to make the reader knowledgeable. Proverbs teaches how to live wisely.

The Fear of the LORD Is the Beginning

The foundation of biblical wisdom was introduced earlier in this Study Guide. Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 1:7**:

> *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction."*

Wisdom therefore begins with our attitude towards God. A person may possess education, experience and natural intelligence, yet Scripture does not place any of these things at the beginning of true knowledge.

It begins with *"the fear of the LORD."*

To fear the LORD is to recognise His authority and approach His instruction with reverence. The wise person is therefore teachable because he recognises that truth does not originate within himself.

The opposite attitude is also identified: *"fools despise wisdom and instruction."* The contrast is important. Wisdom receives instruction, while foolishness rejects it.

This principle runs throughout Proverbs. A wise life begins with a willingness to listen, learn and allow God's truth to direct the way we live.

Words of the Wise

Proverbs contains "the words of the wise." **Proverbs 22:17** states:

> *"Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge."*

Notice that the verse contains more than the command to hear. It says, *"Bow down thine ear,"* then *"hear the words of the wise,"* and finally, *"apply thine heart unto my knowledge."*

Wisdom therefore requires both hearing and application. It is possible to hear good instruction without allowing that instruction to influence our choices.

The movement is simple:

Listen → Receive → Apply.

That is practical wisdom.

Wisdom Was Taught to Others

During the time of Solomon, wisdom was not regarded simply as private knowledge. Wise men and teachers helped communicate instruction to the people, alongside the wider guidance given through priests and prophets.

Proverbs could take important truths and express them in forms that were short enough to remember but deep enough to require thought. This method of teaching is valuable because a brief statement can remain in the mind long after a longer explanation has been forgotten.

A proverb may contain only a few words, yet those words can cause a person to stop, reflect and examine his conduct.

The aim is not simply to ask, What does this statement mean? The greater question is: How should this wisdom affect the way I live?

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does the fear of the LORD begin true wisdom in Proverbs?

Personal Reflection

Whose advice has more weight in your daily choices than God's wisdom?

Action Step

Choose a proverb for a decision before you. What advice or impulse must you set aside to follow God's wisdom?

Solomon Was Known for Wisdom

Solomon became especially associated with wisdom during his reign. Scripture records the extraordinary extent of his proverbs and songs.

1 Kings 4:32 states:

> *"And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five."*

Solomon therefore produced far more proverbs and songs than those preserved within the biblical books. This reminds us that Scripture does not attempt to preserve everything Solomon ever said. What has been preserved provides the wisdom God intended to remain available for succeeding generations.

Solomon's association with both proverbs and songs also helps us understand why wisdom and poetry belong naturally together. Truth could be taught through memorable sayings as well as expressed through poetic and musical forms.

A Practical Book

One of the most distinctive features of Proverbs is its practical character. Rather than telling one continuing historical story, it presents concentrated wisdom that can be applied to ordinary life.

Its instruction is intended to help people live fruitfully and wisely. This makes Proverbs very different from simply collecting interesting ideas. Biblical wisdom is meant to influence behaviour.

A person may be able to repeat a proverb accurately yet still fail to live wisely. The purpose is fulfilled only when truth moves from the page into conduct.

This is why the instruction of **Proverbs 22:17** is so important:

> *"Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge."*

The heart must be involved. Wisdom is not simply memorised.

Wisdom is lived.

Listen to Those Who Have Gone Before

One of the important principles emphasised in Proverbs is the value of listening to the wisdom of those who have gone before us.

Parents, teachers and older people may possess understanding gained through years of experience. A younger person can either benefit from that wisdom or insist upon learning every lesson through personal failure.

Listening does not mean accepting every human opinion without examination. The principle is that wisdom is willing to learn rather than assuming that it already knows everything.

A teachable person asks questions, listens carefully and considers instruction before rejecting it. Foolishness often appears when a person becomes unwilling to receive correction because he believes his own judgement is sufficient.

Proverbs therefore encourages an attitude that says: I am willing to learn.

That attitude is essential for spiritual growth.

Wisdom Requires Humility

Another important principle is humility. Humility and teachability belong together because a proud person finds correction difficult. Correction requires admitting that something in our understanding or conduct may need to change.

A humble person can receive instruction without viewing correction as an attack. This does not mean that humility is weakness. Humility is the willingness to recognise that we do not know everything and that we need wisdom beyond ourselves.

The opening principle of Proverbs makes this especially clear. If *"the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,"* then wisdom begins by recognising someone greater than ourselves.

True wisdom therefore cannot grow properly alongside self-exaltation. The person seeking wisdom must remain willing to say: God knows better than I do.

That principle protects us from allowing personal preference to become our final authority.

Proverbs and the Teaching Method of Jesus

The use of short sayings, comparisons and memorable teaching did not disappear with the Old Testament. Jesus also taught through parables, communicating spiritual truth through illustrations that required His hearers to listen and consider carefully.

Matthew wrote in **Matthew 13:34**:

> *"All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them:"*

A parable and a proverb are not exactly the same form, but both demonstrate how truth can be communicated through language that requires thought.

Jesus did not always present teaching as a long explanation. At times He placed truth into a picture, comparison or story that remained in the minds of those who heard Him.

This helps us appreciate the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. God has often communicated truth in forms designed not simply to be heard once, but to be remembered and considered.

Short Statements Can Contain Deep Truth

The brevity of many proverbs should not cause us to treat them lightly. A short statement can expose:

- A wrong attitude;
- A foolish decision;
- A need for humility;
- The importance of listening;
- The difference between wisdom and foolishness.

Because many proverbs are concise, the reader must sometimes slow down rather than rush forward.

The appropriate response is not simply, I have read it. The better response is: What is this teaching me about the way I think and live?

This approach turns Proverbs from a collection of sayings into instruction for life.

Wisdom Must Be Applied

Knowledge and wisdom are not identical. A person can know what is right without doing what is right. He can understand good advice but refuse to follow it. He can recognise a foolish path and still choose to walk in it.

Proverbs continually confronts this difference between hearing and living. This is why practical wisdom requires action.

When wisdom shows us a better way, we must be willing to follow it. When instruction exposes pride, we must become humble. When those with greater experience give wise counsel, we must be willing to listen.

When God's Word challenges our own judgement, God's Word must take the higher place.

This is wisdom moving from understanding into life.

Wisdom for Every Generation

The circumstances of life change from one generation to another, but the need for wisdom does not.

Every generation must learn how to listen, make decisions, receive correction and live with humility. Every generation faces the danger of believing that its own understanding is sufficient.

This is why the practical instruction of Proverbs remains valuable. Its teaching is not limited to the ancient world in which it was first spoken.

The central question remains: Will we live wisely before God?

The beginning of that wisdom remains unchanged: *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."*

From Wisdom to Jesus Christ

Proverbs teaches us to seek wisdom, receive instruction and apply truth to everyday life. Yet biblical wisdom must never become simply a method for becoming more successful according to human standards.

Wisdom begins with God and must remain centred upon Him.

Jesus demonstrated perfect wisdom in the way He taught and lived. His use of parables also shows how spiritual truth can be expressed in ways that call people to listen, consider and respond.

The principle established in Proverbs therefore prepares us for everything that follows: Truth must be heard, received and lived.

Job taught us that human understanding has limits. Psalms taught us to bring every experience before God. Proverbs now teaches us to receive God's wisdom and apply it to the choices of everyday life.

The next book, Ecclesiastes, asks an even broader question: What gives human life meaning and purpose?

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must a wise saying be understood and lived rather than repeated?

Personal Reflection

Which proverb challenges a habit in your speech or conduct?

Action Step

Read a proverb about speech or conduct. What specific habit will you correct in your next conversation or action?

ECCLESIASTES: THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF LIFE

BACK TO CONTENTS

Approximate Historical Setting: c. 940-930 B.C.

Approximate Date of Writing: c. 940-930 B.C., written by Solomon

Place in the Biblical Story: A reflection upon the meaning of life, the limitations of earthly pursuits and the necessity of living before God

Ecclesiastes is the fourth of the five Books of Wisdom and Poetry and contains twelve chapters. The book is associated with Solomon and examines some of the deepest questions people ask concerning life, purpose, achievement, pleasure, work, wisdom and death.

The title Ecclesiastes is connected with the idea of *"the Preacher,"* one who addresses or speaks before an assembly. The book uses several forms of expression, including poetry, proverbs and extended reflection, as Solomon considers what gives human life lasting meaning.

A central word throughout Ecclesiastes is *"vanity."* Solomon repeatedly examines life when it is viewed only through earthly experience and discovers that nothing temporary can provide the final meaning for which humanity searches.

Vanity of Vanities

Ecclesiastes opens with a striking declaration. Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 1:2-3**:

> *"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?"*

The word vanity expresses emptiness, passing value and the inability of earthly things to provide lasting satisfaction.

Solomon is not saying that everything people do is completely worthless. He is asking a deeper question: What lasting profit can earthly achievement provide when life itself is temporary?

A person may work, build, gain possessions and accomplish remarkable things, yet none of those things can prevent life from passing away. This question becomes one of the great themes of Ecclesiastes.

The Search for Satisfaction

Solomon had unusual opportunity to test what the world could offer. He possessed wealth, authority, wisdom and the ability to pursue many different forms of pleasure and achievement.

Yet after considering what he had accomplished, he wrote in **Ecclesiastes 2:10-11**:

> *"And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."*

Solomon had obtained things that many people spend their lives pursuing. He had possessions, accomplishment, pleasure and influence, yet he discovered that none of these things could provide final satisfaction.

The problem was not simply that Solomon needed more. He had already experienced abundance. The deeper problem was that temporary things cannot satisfy the deepest purpose of human life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why could the search for satisfaction not end with things under the sun?

Personal Reflection

What pursuit has promised you more lasting satisfaction than it can give?

Action Step

Identify something you have pursued for lasting satisfaction. How will you redirect your priorities towards the purpose found in God?

There Is a Time for Everything

Ecclesiastes also reflects upon the changing seasons of life. Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**:

> *"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace."*

Life contains changing circumstances. There is birth and death, gain and loss, joy and sorrow, building and breaking down, speaking and silence.

Wisdom therefore includes recognising that life does not remain in one condition forever. Ecclesiastes reminds us that we cannot control every season, but we can learn to live faithfully through each one.

Human Understanding Has Limits

Like Job, Ecclesiastes also confronts the limitations of human understanding. People naturally want explanations. We want to know why circumstances change, why some things succeed and others fail, and why life does not always develop according to our expectations.

Yet there are matters that remain beyond our understanding. Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 8:17**:

> *"Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it."*

Wisdom therefore includes recognising what we cannot know.

This does not mean we stop studying or asking questions. It means we do not make our trust in God dependent upon receiving an explanation for everything.

There are times when we must acknowledge that God's knowledge is greater than ours.

Wisdom Has Value

Although Ecclesiastes exposes the limitations of human wisdom, it does not treat wisdom as useless.

Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 7:12**:

> *"For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it."*

Wisdom has practical value. It helps people make better choices, understand life more clearly and avoid unnecessary foolishness.

Yet even wisdom cannot solve every problem of human existence. The wisest person still faces ageing, circumstances beyond his control and eventually death.

Ecclesiastes therefore prevents us from turning wisdom itself into an idol. Wisdom is valuable, but God remains greater than wisdom.

Remember Thy Creator

As Solomon moves towards the conclusion of Ecclesiastes, the emphasis becomes increasingly personal. He wrote in **Ecclesiastes 12:1**:

> *"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;"*

The instruction is especially important for young people. Do not wait until later life to begin thinking seriously about God. Do not assume that youth will continue indefinitely, and do not spend the strongest years of life pursuing things that cannot provide lasting meaning.

The command is: *"Remember now thy Creator."*

Life finds its proper direction when the Creator is placed at the centre.

The Conclusion of the Whole Matter

After examining labour, pleasure, wisdom, wealth, time, uncertainty and the passing nature of life, Solomon finally brings the argument to its conclusion.

He wrote in **Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**:

> *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil."*

This is where the searching of Ecclesiastes finally leads. Not to wealth, pleasure, achievement or even human wisdom.

The conclusion is: *"Fear God."*

And: *"keep his commandments."*

Human life cannot be understood properly while God is removed from it.

Life Must Be Understood in Relation to God

Ecclesiastes therefore challenges the idea that meaning can be found simply by accumulating more. More possessions do not provide the answer. More pleasure does not provide the answer. More achievement does not provide the answer.

Even greater human wisdom cannot answer every question.

The central problem is not that people have failed to experience enough of the world. The problem is that life cannot find its true meaning apart from the God who gave it.

There will always be matters beyond our comprehension. In those moments, wisdom requires us to trust the One whose understanding is complete.

This brings Ecclesiastes into harmony with the larger message of the Wisdom books. Job teaches us that we cannot understand every circumstance. Psalms teaches us to bring every circumstance before God. Proverbs teaches us to receive God's wisdom for everyday living.

Ecclesiastes now teaches us that earthly life cannot provide its own final meaning. The deepest purpose of life must be found in God.

For the believer, that truth ultimately directs us towards Jesus Christ, in whom the purpose and life of God are fully revealed.

The next and final Book of Wisdom and Poetry, Song of Solomon, turns our attention towards love, devotion and relationship.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do life's limits and the call to remember God belong together in Ecclesiastes?

Personal Reflection

Has this book changed what you count as a worthwhile use of time?

Action Step

Consider the conclusion of Ecclesiastes. What use of your time must change because your life belongs to God?

SONG OF SOLOMON: LOVE, DEVOTION AND RELATIONSHIP

BACK TO CONTENTS

Approximate Historical Setting: c. 940-930 B.C.
Approximate Date of Writing: c. 940-930 B.C., written by Solomon
Place in the Biblical Story: A continuing poem or love song expressing love, devotion and the closeness of relationship

Song of Solomon is the fifth and final Book of Wisdom and Poetry and contains eight chapters. Unlike Proverbs, which consists largely of individual sayings of wisdom, Song of Solomon is best read as one continuing poem or love song.

The book is also called the Song of Songs. This expression communicates excellence, much as Scripture uses expressions such as *"God of gods," "Lord of lords"* and *"King of kings."* It therefore carries the thought of a song of particular significance and beauty.

A Song About Love

At its most immediate level, Song of Solomon presents the language of love and devotion between a man and a woman. It celebrates affection, longing, admiration, belonging and the closeness intended within a loving relationship.

One of the simplest expressions of this mutual belonging appears in **Song of Solomon 2:16**:

> *"My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies."*

The words express both love and belonging: *"My beloved is mine, and I am his."*

Love is therefore not presented simply as an emotion experienced from a distance. It involves relationship, commitment and a personal bond between those who love one another.

Love Is Powerful

The language becomes especially strong near the end of the book. **Song of Solomon 8:6-7** states:

> *"Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned."*

The verse presents love as something powerful and enduring: *"Many waters cannot quench love."*

True love cannot simply be measured in material value. The verse continues by explaining that even if a person offered all the substance of his house for love, such an exchange would be inadequate.

Love therefore possesses a value that cannot be reduced to possessions or outward advantage.

The Spiritual Lesson of Relationship

Song of Solomon has also been understood spiritually as illustrating the relationship between God and His people. Its language of love, belonging and devotion provides a picture through which the closeness of spiritual relationship can be considered.

The relationship between husband and wife provides an important biblical picture because marriage involves love, devotion, faithfulness, belonging, closeness and commitment.

These same ideas help us understand the kind of relationship God desires with His people. The spiritual life is therefore more than outward religious observance. God desires a people who belong to Him and whose hearts are directed towards Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does Song of Solomon treat love as more than an outward display?

Personal Reflection

What does this teaching ask you to consider about faithful devotion?

Action Step

Reflect on faithful love in Song of Solomon. What selfish attitude could change as you show patient care in an appropriate relationship?

Christ and His Church

The New Testament uses the relationship between husband and wife to help explain the relationship between Jesus Christ and His Church.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 5:25-27**:

> *"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish."*

Paul places the love of Christ for His Church beside the love a husband should have for his wife. Notice the depth of that love: *"Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it."*

The relationship is therefore not casual or distant. Christ's love is demonstrated through what He gave.

Song of Solomon's language of love and devotion can therefore help us appreciate this larger biblical picture of Christ and His people.

More Than Outward Religion

This is particularly important because a person can participate in outward religious activity without possessing a close relationship with Jesus Christ.

Song of Solomon reminds us that relationship involves the heart. Love cannot be reduced to ceremony, devotion cannot be replaced by outward performance, and belonging cannot be produced through religious association.

The language *"My beloved is mine, and I am his"* speaks of something personal.

For the believer, our relationship with Jesus Christ is likewise personal. We do not simply know facts about Him. The believer possesses the Person. We belong to Him, and Jesus Christ dwells within those who are born of God.

Love Produces Devotion

Genuine love also produces faithfulness. When a person deeply loves another, that relationship affects priorities, choices and conduct. In the same way, love for God cannot remain only an emotional statement.

Jesus said in **John 14:15**:

> *"If ye love me, keep my commandments."*

Love and obedience therefore belong together. The believer does not obey in order to persuade Jesus to love him. Love for Christ produces a desire to walk according to His truth.

Song of Solomon's language of devotion helps us understand this principle. True relationship is expressed not only in words but also through faithfulness.

The Final Book of Wisdom and Poetry

Song of Solomon completes the five Books of Wisdom and Poetry with a subject that belongs naturally beside everything we have already considered.

Job confronted suffering and the limits of human understanding. Psalms expressed worship, prayer, sorrow, hope and praise. Proverbs taught wisdom for everyday living.

Ecclesiastes examined the meaning and purpose of life. Song of Solomon now brings our attention to love, devotion and relationship.

Together, these books address some of the deepest experiences of human life. They show that wisdom is not simply intellectual knowledge. Biblical wisdom touches suffering, worship, choices, purpose and relationships.

Most importantly, Song of Solomon reminds us that God's purpose is not simply that people should know about Him from a distance. The greater spiritual reality is relationship with Jesus Christ.

The language of love, belonging and devotion therefore provides an appropriate conclusion to the five Books of Wisdom and Poetry before we gather their practical lessons together in the next section, Wisdom for Everyday Living.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can the book's picture of love help you consider Christ and His Church?

Personal Reflection

Have you given more attention to outward religion than to love for Christ?

Action Step

Read a verse about devotion and love. Where has outward routine replaced sincere love, and how will you respond to Jesus Christ?

WISDOM FOR EVERYDAY LIVING

BACK TO CONTENTS

The Books of Wisdom and Poetry were not preserved simply because of their literary beauty. Their continuing value is found in the way they comfort, instruct, challenge and guide God's people through the experiences of everyday life.

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon address very different subjects, yet together they provide wisdom for suffering, worship, family, decisions, relationships, uncertainty and spiritual growth.

Comfort in Times of Trouble

The Psalms have brought encouragement to believers across many generations because they give words to experiences that people often find difficult to express. There are Psalms for joy, sorrow, fear, repentance, thanksgiving and confidence in God.

This is one reason they have been used during persecution, hardship and times of great uncertainty. When people have struggled to know what to pray or say, the Psalms have often given expression to both their suffering and their faith.

David wrote in **Psalm 34:17-18**:

> *"The righteous cry, and the LORD heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles. The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit."*

The Psalms therefore remind us that trouble does not place us beyond God's knowledge or care.

Hope During Suffering

Job speaks particularly to those passing through severe trials. Job could not understand why so many terrible things had happened to him, yet his experience teaches us that suffering does not necessarily mean that God has abandoned a person.

Job declared in **Job 23:10**:

> *"But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."*

These words are especially meaningful because Job spoke them while he was still suffering. He did not yet have the answer, and his circumstances had not yet changed, but he could still say, *"he knoweth the way that I take."*

That confidence has brought hope to many people during times when they also could not understand what was happening in their lives.

Wisdom for Family Life

The Wisdom books also speak directly to family relationships. Proverbs contains instruction concerning parents, children, discipline, listening and the importance of receiving guidance. One generation has a responsibility to help prepare the next.

Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 1:8-9**:

> *"My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother:*
> *For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck."*

The emphasis is upon listening. Young people do not need to learn every lesson through personal failure. They can benefit from the wisdom, experience and instruction of those who have already travelled further through life.

Parents also have a responsibility to provide sound instruction rather than expecting children to discover wisdom for themselves.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can these writings give comfort and guidance without hiding suffering?

Personal Reflection

Which truth from Job, Psalms, or Proverbs would help you in a present difficulty?

Action Step

Choose a truth from Job, Psalms or Proverbs for a current difficulty. How will that truth change your response to the situation?

Guidance for the Future

Young people naturally think about the future. They consider what direction to take, what choices to make and what kind of person they should become.

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes repeatedly bring these questions back to God. Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 3:5-6**:

> *"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.*
> *In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."*

This does not promise that every decision will become easy. It establishes the principle that our confidence must not rest entirely upon our own understanding.

Ecclesiastes gives similar direction when it says, *"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth."* The future is best approached by placing God at the centre before life's habits and priorities become firmly established.

Wisdom in Every Circumstance

The Wisdom books cover a remarkable range of human experience. They speak to us when:

- Life is joyful;
- Life is painful;
- Decisions are difficult;
- The future is uncertain;
- Relationships need wisdom;
- Suffering raises questions;
- Worship flows naturally;
- Faith requires perseverance.

This breadth is one of their greatest strengths. They do not present spiritual life as though every day will feel the same. Human experience changes, but truth remains available within every season.

Job teaches us how to trust when answers are incomplete. Psalms teaches us how to turn towards God through every emotion. Proverbs teaches us how wisdom should shape practical choices.

Ecclesiastes teaches us not to build our lives around things that cannot provide lasting meaning, while Song of Solomon reminds us of the importance of love, devotion and relationship.

Wisdom Must Be Lived

The purpose of biblical wisdom is not simply to give us something interesting to think about. Wisdom must affect life.

A proverb that is remembered but ignored has not fulfilled its purpose. A Psalm that is admired but never turns our heart towards God remains only words to us. A lesson from Job that never changes the way we respond to suffering has not yet become practical wisdom.

The question therefore becomes: What will I do with what I have learned?

James later expressed this principle plainly in **James 1:22**:

> *"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."*

Wisdom becomes fruitful when truth is received and lived.

A Close Relationship With God

Another theme running through these books is the importance of relationship with God. The Psalmist speaks of *"my God."* Job longs for understanding before God. Proverbs begins wisdom with *"the fear of the LORD."*

Ecclesiastes concludes by directing us back to God, while Song of Solomon uses the language of love and belonging. The result is a picture of spiritual life that is both reverent and deeply personal.

God is not presented simply as a subject to study. He is the One to whom we pray, whom we trust, whose wisdom we receive and whose truth directs our lives.

Wisdom Ultimately Leads to Jesus Christ

These five books provide wisdom for many situations, but they do not lead us to confidence in human wisdom. Again and again, they show its limits.

Human understanding cannot explain everything. Human achievement cannot provide lasting meaning. Human strength cannot remove suffering, and human wisdom cannot replace relationship with God.

The greater direction is towards Jesus Christ. In Him, the believer finds the One who gives meaning to life, wisdom for the path, comfort in suffering and a living relationship with God.

The Books of Wisdom and Poetry therefore remain deeply practical. They speak to real people living through real circumstances, and they continually call us to trust God, receive His wisdom and live according to His truth.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must wisdom be lived in family life and future choices?

Personal Reflection

Where do you know a wise course but still need to follow it?

Action Step

Identify a wise course you already know but have delayed following. What specific response will you make this week, and why?

CONCLUSION: WISDOM ULTIMATELY LEADS TO JESUS CHRIST

BACK TO CONTENTS

The five Books of Wisdom and Poetry have taken us through some of the deepest experiences of human life. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon speak about suffering, worship, wisdom, purpose, love, devotion and our relationship with God.

Although these books differ greatly in style, they belong together because they show how God's truth reaches into everyday life. They do not deal only with national history or covenant events. They speak directly to the questions, emotions, decisions and relationships that shape human experience.

Wisdom Is More Than Knowledge

We began by seeing that biblical wisdom is more than the possession of information. Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 1:7**:

> *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction."*

True wisdom begins with God. It requires humility, a teachable heart and a willingness to receive truth and then live according to it.

The Wisdom books therefore continually move us from knowing to living.

Each Book Contributes Something Important

Job teaches us that suffering cannot always be explained through simple human reasoning. It reminds us that God's understanding is greater than ours and that faith can remain even when answers are incomplete.

Psalms teaches us to bring every part of life before God. Joy, sorrow, repentance, fear, thanksgiving and hope can all become part of prayer and worship.

Proverbs gives practical wisdom for daily living. It teaches us to listen, remain humble, receive instruction and make choices that agree with God's truth.

Ecclesiastes confronts the emptiness of trying to build a meaningful life entirely upon temporary things. Wealth, pleasure, achievement and human wisdom cannot provide the final purpose of life.

Song of Solomon reminds us of the importance of love, devotion and relationship. Spiritual life is more than outward religion. It involves belonging to God in a personal and faithful relationship.

The Books Speak to Every Generation

These writings remain relevant because the circumstances they address have not disappeared. People still suffer and search for meaning. Families still need wisdom, and young people still make choices about their future.

People still experience joy, sorrow, love, disappointment and uncertainty. The Wisdom books therefore continue to instruct, comfort and challenge believers in every generation.

Wisdom Ultimately Leads to Christ

The final direction of biblical wisdom is not confidence in human ability. Job shows the limits of human understanding, while Ecclesiastes shows the limits of earthly achievement. Proverbs teaches that wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD, and Psalms repeatedly turns the heart towards God.

Together, these books prepare us to look beyond ourselves. Jesus Christ is the One in whom God's wisdom, truth, purpose and life are fully revealed.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 1:30**:

> *"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:"*

Jesus Christ is therefore not simply another teacher of wisdom.

He is made unto us wisdom.

The Books of Wisdom and Poetry help us understand the many experiences of life, but their greatest value is realised when those experiences lead us towards deeper trust in Jesus Christ.

As we continue through the Old Testament, the same principle will remain before us: Scripture speaks through history, poetry, wisdom, prophecy and worship, but throughout it all God's truth continues directing us towards Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do these books bring wisdom, worship, suffering, and love towards Christ?

Personal Reflection

Which teaching has most corrected or strengthened your understanding?

Action Step

Return to the teaching that challenged you most. How will it change your decisions, relationships or trust in Jesus Christ?

SUBMISSION TO COGMA FOR APPRAISAL

Instructions

Complete this section after you have finished the Study Guide. It must be completed online.

The link is located at the bottom of the online Study Guide — https://cogma.com.au/study-guides/

Your answers should reflect your understanding, your personal response, and how you intend to live by the truth you have studied. Answer honestly and be specific.

1. Main Truth

How do Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon address suffering, worship, everyday choices, life's limits and faithful love? Explain why wisdom and poetry ultimately direct the reader toward Jesus Christ.

2. Understanding

How does Hebrew parallelism help you read a psalm or proverb accurately, and why must Job's suffering and Ecclesiastes' questions be read in their full setting rather than as isolated lines?

3. Personal Reflection

Which response to suffering in Job most challenges your assumptions about God, human understanding or the counsel you give someone in pain? Explain what you need to reconsider.

4. Response to Truth

How should the Psalms' examples of lament, prayer and praise change the way you speak to God in difficulty, and how does their witness to the Messiah shape your hope?

5. Action Step

Choose a proverb about speech. What does it reveal about your present words or motives, and how will the wisdom of God's Word change your next conversation?

6. Early Response

Have you faced a conversation in which you could apply that proverb? Describe how you responded and what changed, or explain what has prevented you from beginning.

7. Ongoing Practice

What ongoing practice will help you remember Ecclesiastes' warning about a life built only on temporary pursuits while seeking the wisdom for everyday living taught in Proverbs?

8. Doctrinal Clarity

How do Song of Solomon's treatment of love and devotion, Proverbs' teaching on relationships and the Psalms' worship of God differ in purpose, and what does each contribute to a faithful life?

9. Living the Truth

Think of a real decision in which you need wisdom. How will you draw on Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or Song of Solomon, and what will you do because of that teaching?

10. Final Response

Bring together the teaching about suffering in Job, worship in Psalms, daily wisdom in Proverbs, life's limits in Ecclesiastes, and faithful love in Song of Solomon. Which truth has most changed you, and how does it direct you towards Christ?