

Introduction, II

The first topic that we will study together is entitled, “An Introduction to the Course and its Contents.” The books on which this course will focus include probably the most familiar of the Old Testament books, the Psalms. But it also includes some of the least familiar or the least understood books in the Old Testament. If you were in Sunday school, as I was as a child, you might have learned to navigate the Bible by opening to the middle, and you will find Psalms. This may not work with every version of the Bible, but for the most part, the book of Psalms is right in the middle of the Bible—literally, and also in many other ways such as theologically. But we will also deal with the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, books that many people find depressing and have a hard time understanding. But I think they are very important books. There is much depression in society today, and perhaps in our own lives from time to time. Some of us even have very deep problems with depression, and so it is nice to know that God understands it. I think we will enjoy reading Ecclesiastes. We will also read Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon. Its real title is “Solomon’s Song of Songs” or “Solomon’s Most Excellent Song.” What kind of literature is that? Is it love poetry between a man and a woman? Is it allegory? What is it we are reading when we read the Song of Songs? I would guess that you have not heard much teaching on the Song of Songs. So, if it is not teachable, why is it in the Bible? What are we to take from a book like that? We will be focusing on those books along with Lamentations—we will talk about how that got into this grouping.

First, let us do a little defining. Let us define and delimit the course. Defining is difficult. In many curricula, this course would be called “Poetical Books.” That title is not bad, but it is a bit of a misnomer because these are not the only books in the Bible that have poetry. What other books of the Bible are largely poetic? The prophetic books are largely poetical in their composition. They are made up of prophetic poems, as it were. But even in the narrative portions, such as in the Pentateuch, we have the song of Moses in Exodus 15 after the crossing of the Red Sea. Moses’ song is a poem. In Judges 5 we have the song of Deborah, after the interesting battle when she tried to get Barak to join her. She wanted him to lead the people, but he refused. So she said, “Okay, I will go, but the glory will not go to you—it will go to a woman.” Everyone would think the woman would be Deborah, but it was actually Jael who drove a tent peg through the enemy captain’s head. Also, there is the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Hannah, one of my favorite biblical characters, is rejoicing when God answered her prayer by giving her a son. Second Samuel 1, David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan, is a poetical composition. Second Samuel 22, the song of David, and 2 Samuel 23, the last words of David, are all poems. These examples are all psalms or songs of some sort. Therefore, when I think of the poetical books, I think there is poetry everywhere. That is why I did not want to call only these books the poetical books.

There is a tradition in the way we subdivide the canon. We talk about the Pentateuch, the Law, the historical books, the poetical books, and the prophetic books. At least in the Western church, we tend to divide the canon in that way, which is where the name, “poetical books,” came from. Nevertheless, I think it is better to call them the Psalms and the wisdom books. After all, the book of Ecclesiastes is not entirely poetry. There are some proverbs in there that are laid out as poems or in poetical lines, but the book itself contains much prose. Thus the poetical books do not really represent a proper division in the Hebrew canon. The Hebrew or Jewish tradition divides up the Old Testament into the law, the prophets, and the writings. The first five books, what we sometimes call the Pentateuch, are the law. The prophetic books are divided into the former prophets and the latter prophets, further dividing them into major and minor prophets. The former prophets are what we often call the historical books: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. Those are called the former prophets and that is helpful in that every history is written from a particular viewpoint. The viewpoint of biblical history is God’s viewpoint. If the prophets were those who spoke for God in their societies, then the books written about

events in the life of God's people are written from God's perspective. They are prophetic in orientation. The latter prophets they divide into major and minor prophets. Major and minor is really determined by the length of the material. So the major prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; the minor prophets are the others. The writings, then, are comprised of pretty much everything else that is left. These are Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and then 1 and 2 Chronicles end the Hebrew Canon. Our divisions were introduced, I think, by the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—and also through the Vulgate, which was the Latin translation.

Thus defining the course is a little bit difficult because we cannot say this is a course on the writings because many of them are not covered. And it is not simply on the poetical books because many other books are also poetical. Therefore it is better to say, "Psalms and wisdom books." We will learn what those wisdom books are.

In terms of the scope of the course, we are dealing with what Jewish tradition calls "The Book of Truth." The Hebrew letters that begin the names of Job, Proverbs, and the Psalms form an acronym—the Hebrew word for "truth," *emet*. Therefore they referred to Job, Proverbs and Psalms as "The Book of Truth." So we will focus on these three books as well as Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Lamentations. That will be the scope of the course. How did we decide on these books? Well, some of the other books in the writings are taken up in other categories such as historical books and so will be treated in courses on the historical books.

Let us move on to the next point, the date of the writings. When were these books written? Let me begin with the qualification that to talk about the date of this corpus of writings is not the same as talking about the date of the individual portions within them. The various sections of the books may have been written at different times. If you think about the Psalms, for example, Psalm 90 is ascribed to Moses, and Psalm 137 is clearly exilic or post-exilic. Thus there is perhaps not quite a thousand-year span from the writing of the first psalm to the last. So what is the date of the book of Psalms? I suppose as a final collection it would be post-exilic, but many of the Psalms were pre-exilic, prior to the exile. Therefore it is not always easy with these books to give them a date.

Another interesting instance is in Proverbs. Proverbs is attributed largely to Solomon. Solomon was the wisdom teacher *par excellence* in Israel. But there is a very interesting notice in Proverbs chapter 25 that says that this is Solomon's material that was transcribed or copied by the men of Hezekiah. Hezekiah reigned about 200 years after the reign of Solomon. So some Solomonic material was retained but was not part of Proverbs for over 200 years until the men of Hezekiah said, "This is good material; it should be in the book." If this troubles you as you think about the inspiration of Scripture, bear in mind that God is the one orchestrating all of this. God is in charge. If He can present us with Scripture through a single individual, He can also present us with His Word through a complex process such as I have just described. There are also other authors mentioned in the book of Proverbs: Agur and King Lemuel, for example, at the end of the book. The earliest explicit reference to the writings comes from the prologue to a book called Ecclesiasticus, which is distinct from Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is a canonical book we will be studying. Ecclesiasticus is an Apocrypha book. It is also sometimes called Sirach after the Greek name of Jesus Ben Sirach. In the preface to this book, written by the grandson of Jesus Ben Sirach—Jesus was a reasonably common name—we have the first known reference to the writings and to this breakdown of the Hebrew or Old Testament canon. This is what the grandson said, writing about 200 years before Christ:

A legacy of great value has come to us through the law, the prophets, and the writers who followed in their steps. And for this, Israel's tradition of discipline and wisdom deserve

recognition. It is the duty of those who study the Scriptures not only to become experts themselves, but also to use their scholarship for the benefit of the outside world through both the spoken and written word. So my grandfather, Jesus, who had applied himself industriously to the study of the law, the prophets, and the other writings of our ancestors and had gained a considerable proficiency in them, was moved to compile a book of his own on the themes of discipline and wisdom so that with this further help scholars might make greater progress in their studies by living as the law directs.

He adds that it is hard to translate a text. That is why I am encouraging you to have two or three versions of the Bible available, if possible, so that you can compare them. There is always an interpretive aspect in a translation. But the main point is that he mentions twice, “The law, the prophets, and the rest of the writings,” or, “the other writings of our ancestors.” There is some vagueness in his reference to “the rest of the writings.” It is almost as if that portion of the canon was just being solidified. That is possible that this would have been about the time that the final canonization of God’s Old Testament Word was being crystallized.

Moving on to the next point, we have a couple of key verses in the New Testament. Luke 24:44 is the only explicit New Testament reference to the division of the canon. This is a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus: “He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.’” It was Jewish practice to choose the first and perhaps foremost book as the title for a whole collection of works. So in calling the writings, “the Psalms,” Jesus is alluding, I believe, to this corpus that we call “the writings.” What came first stood for the whole. An implicit reference to the division of the Old Testament is found in Matthew 23:34-35. We could easily bypass this one if we were not careful in watching for it. We will start, though, with verse 33 instead of 34: “You snakes, you brood of vipers, how will you escape being condemned to hell?” Jesus is speaking here. We sometimes paint our own picture of Jesus, and sometimes we paint our own picture of the Old Testament God and the New Testament God. We may picture the Old Testament God as the God of wrath and the New Testament God as the God of grace and mercy. But that is not right. Grace, mercy, and justice are all part of God’s character in both the Old and New Testaments. Here Jesus, the incarnation of God, says, “You snakes, you brood of vipers, how will you escape being condemned to hell?” I do not want to digress too much, but whatever debates may be going on, we need to hear the words of our Savior. He is our Savior because we have a real problem and we need real redemption. He then goes on to say, and this is our more esoteric point, “Therefore, I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify, others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town; and so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berakiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” So Jesus in this statement refers to the first book of the Bible (Genesis, “the blood of righteous Abel”), and the last book of the Bible as it was in His time (2 Chronicles, “the blood of Zechariah, son of Berakiah”). Thus we have these New Testament witnesses to the shape of the canon and to the fact that, at least by the time of Christ, these writings were well known. We cannot say precisely when the finalization of the Old Testament canon was, but it seems clear that by the time of Christ the canon would have had the shape that it has now.

What is the line of demarcation between the former and the latter prophets? There are two things. The latter prophets are sometimes referred to as the writing prophets. The former prophets may have done some writing, but if they did, their literature is not retained as prophetic writings. Chronicles, for instance, mentions writings of Samuel. Samuel may have been a historiographer of his day, though we are speculating to say that. But the former prophets appear as prophets in narrative, whereas the latter

prophets are the writing prophets. And the line of demarcation is about the 8th Century BC. The latter prophets pick up and take off at that point.

Let us talk about the distinctives of the Psalms and wisdom books. There are three things I would like to talk about with this: the human perspective, contemporary relevance, and hermeneutical difficulties. Let us talk about the human perspective, first of all. A distinctive feature of these portions of God's Word to us is the point of view of their voice. Man, human beings, or the human voice plays a very prominent role in them. About this Derek Kidner says, "If in the law and prophets the dominant voice is God speaking to man, in the books we will be studying we find inspired examples of man's response to God (the Psalms) or to life (the wisdom books), which despite its perplexities is nonetheless seen as God's world over which He is sovereign." So these books guide us in our prayers, praises, and response to God—our outcries in the midst of the struggles that we encounter in life. God has provided us with guidance as to how we should respond to the difficulties of life. We ought not to respond by glossing over the difficulties or pretending they do not exist. Rather, we should face them directly. But as we face them we need to put God in His rightful place, which is in the center of our vision. As we put God in the center the problems we are encountering take their proper proportion. We see that they are still there, and yet God is there as well.

The direction of voice is distinctive. This is our prayers and praises to God, and yet Psalms begins with Psalm 1, which mentions the Torah, the Law. It is called a Torah psalm. Thus in this introductory psalm we learn that not only is this man's response to God, but it is also God's instruction. "Torah" means law or instruction. It is also His instruction for us now. We are to learn from it and live by it. That will raise some difficulties. There are imprecatory psalms—what do we make of those? There are some hard questions when we say this is God's pattern for us. How do we deal with the difficult psalms? The wisdom books are great in their contemporary relevance. They are relevant for us. These books meet us where we are, whether we are rejoicing in God's goodness and singing His praises or whether our minds are troubled by thoughts of our own transience, the frailty of human life, or the dark riddle of the innocent who suffer. These books will show us the way forward, the way toward gaining God's perspective, or simply learning to trust Him even when we have no perspective. Sometimes life presents us with difficulties that we cannot understand; it just never makes sense. That was Job's experience. And when God appeared to Job at the end of the book and had every opportunity to explain to Job what was happening in his life, He did not. Having the answer was not what Job most needed. What Job most needed was to understand that God is God and he is a man. Job can trust Him, even if he does not have all the answers. Job's suffering was extremely significant.

These wisdom books will meet us where we are, though they will not give us all the answers. They often will give us God's perspective, but sometimes they will just call us to trust. I think these books are extremely relevant for our society. Here we find points of contact with our society in all of its problems and questions. When I was growing up, one of the main questions people were struggling with was, "Who am I? Why am I here?" I think people still ask that question, though maybe not in the same words. It is an important question. "Why are we here? What is the point of it all? Is everything meaningless?" The writer of Ecclesiastes seems to be asking these questions. "What is the purpose of life or the issue of suffering and evil?" God is not unaware of that great theological imponderable. It is important that we struggle along with Job and the writer of Ecclesiastes to find what answers we can. But it is also important to rest in God when the answers are not completely forthcoming. The rivers continue to flow into the sea, but the sea is never full of them. A generation comes and a generation goes, but the earth stays the same. Sometimes we wake up and think, "Why am I doing this? What difference will this ever make?" I suppose if you quit working you would starve. That would make a difference. But we do ask

ourselves sometimes, “What is the point of it all?” The Bible provides guidance. It first identifies with us and then guides us and prepares us for the full unfolding of God’s redemption, which comes in Christ.

There is very practical wisdom in these books, especially Proverbs. People in our Western culture are always looking for ways to live successfully, to rear children, to manage their finances, and to have a successful marriage or relationship. How to, how to, how to...well, the book of Proverbs gives us much counsel on “how to.” It is often quite distinctive from what the world is saying, but for that very reason I think that what Proverbs has to say is exceedingly relevant for our society. As we allow Proverbs and the wisdom books of the Old Testament to really permeate who we are and we begin to live by it, we will be distinctive from the world. As the world looks at us and says, “You are different,” they may not like it. But sometimes there will be those whose hearts God is touching and they will say, “Why do you do that the way you do? How are you able to reply with a soft answer? Did you not hear what he said to you? How could you be that way? Do you not need to stand up for yourself?” We could say in reply, “A book of ancient wisdom says, ‘A soft answer turns away wrath.’ I may be able to diffuse this situation by being gentle and humble.” And that would be one example among many. “Why do you rear your children that way? You spank your children? Wait a minute! I read a couple of books recently that said you should never spank a child.”

Of course, we should never beat a child. We will talk about spanking later. We need to be careful how we do it. It begins as a loving act for the good of the child. It ends with loving restoration. It is never angry. It is never violent. And a five-year-old child can tell the difference. My son, Philip, when we were in Germany, was in a kindergarten where all the other kids spoke German and we had told him not to fight. He was a very small and meek boy anyway, but we said, “Do not hit people,” because apparently there was much roughhousing in the kindergarten. The problem is that his German was limited to “*Das ist nicht gut*,” which means, “That is not good.” That was the extent of his five-year-old German. So the other boys were hitting him and he would say, “*Das ist nicht gut*,” and that was about it. So he was taking some abuse, but one day when my wife Polly went to pick him up from kindergarten as they were leaving he saw a man cuff his kid across the side of the face. Philip said, “He hit his son!” He was aghast at what he had just witnessed. And Polly, being a wise mother and taking the opportunity to instruct her child, said, “Well, you know, Philip, we spank you.” He looked at her in astonishment and said, “That is completely different.” To hit someone on the head when you are angry is an act of violence, but a spanking properly administered and then loving restoration of that child is a lesson in life. It teaches them something about God and is good for the child. Child abuse is wrong. But I had a neighbor one time who said, “I could never ever strike my child. That would be to abuse my child.” But I lived below this neighbor and their child was verbally abused. A tongue lashing can hurt much more than a spanking properly administered and done with love. The tongue lashing can last a lifetime. It does not restore or help anyone. We need to be careful; we need to have our moorings in Scripture.

I think there are many practical areas like that about which we can learn from these books and say, “This is what the Bible says.” And when people observe us and say, “Why do you do that?” then this is an opportunity to allude to this ancient book of wisdom. And if they continue to be curious you could tell them that you learned your wisdom from Proverbs, a book of the Bible. This can become a bridge to bringing people in contact with God’s Word, which then can be the means of bringing them into the Kingdom. So I am very excited about these books for many reasons. I cannot imagine a more important book for counseling purposes than Psalms, which is described as the anatomy of all the parts of the soul, Proverbs, or Ecclesiastes. I am excited about these books. I think they are tremendously for us and for the world around us.

In studying these books there are some hermeneutical difficulties. Hermeneutics means “principles of interpretation.” Hermeneutical difficulties are difficulties we have when we encounter a strange kind of literature. These books were written a long time ago in an environment—in a culture—quite different from our own. They were written in different languages, mostly Hebrew with a little Aramaic. They are not immediately transferable into our environment and immediately understandable to us. Looking at the original text reminds us of that. We need some help. We need someone to translate the text unless you have the opportunity for Hebrew training. We also need some guidance as to what this literature is all about. What kind of literature are we dealing with? How do you deal with a psalm that is a cry of rage against God, who seems so silent? What do we make of that? What kind of literature is that? The forms of the literature themselves are intriguing. What is poetry? What do we think about when we talk about poetry? Each culture’s idea of poetry may be quite distinct. Poetry has also changed over time. The poetry in the Old Testament is similar in some respects to ours but it is also quite distinct. It is good to learn those differences because we will understand it better and grasp its messages more clearly. There are many questions that we need to struggle with as we seek to rightly interpret and apply the Word of truth.