

The Old Testament For Grown Ups

Lesson 72 – Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs

Introduction to Job

When one thinks of Job, the topic of suffering usually comes us. “The trials of Job” or “the patience of Job” are sayings we will often hear even in our modern world. However the book of Job isn’t just about Job’s suffering but the question of “why” behind the suffering and the search for wisdom as it relates to the justice of God. The book of Job offers a biblical perspective on suffering (to be distinguished from offering an explanation of suffering). The plot of the book teaches that human ‘wisdom’ is totally inadequate, but God’s wisdom is unfathomably deep. Those looking to Job for answers of the reasons for suffering will often times come away disappointed.

The Overview of the Book of Job

The purpose of the book of Job is to explore God’s policies concerning justice, especially as it regards the suffering of the righteous. Satan (in a ‘heavenly courtroom’ scene) implies that Job is only following God because God has blessed him, and if God were to cut off Job’s blessings then he would stop from following Him.

The calamities that follow cause Job’s friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) to assume that Job had sinned because of what has happened to him, however, Job maintains his innocence. The majority of the book revolves around three rounds of speeches from these friends concerning Job who present their case from ‘conventional wisdom’ (that Job deserved his suffering), believing they understand the ways of God in the world. A character by the name of Elihu comes in during the later part of the book and plays the role of the overconfident youth who think they are wiser than the elders.

Finally, it’s God who plays the ultimate role in the story. In the end the tables are completely turned: the question of where wisdom is found is answered by silencing all human voices that would insist that God must explain himself to them. Here, God simply calls human wisdom into account, powerfully demonstrating over and over again from creation—both its origins and his care for it—that wisdom lies with him alone.

The book ends with God pronouncing his verdict in favor of Job over against his friends, and God blessed and restored Job with a double portion of everything.

The Outline of Job

- I. Prologue: The Testing of Job 1:1-2:13
- II. The Speeches of Job and His Friends (3:1—31:40)
 - Job’s opening statement (3:1–26)
 - First round of speeches (4:1—14:22)
 - Second round of speeches (15:1-21:34)
 - Third round of speeches (22:1—26:14)
 - A poem concerning wisdom (28:1-28)
 - Job’s final speech (29:1—31:40)
- III. Elihu’s Speeches (32:1—37:24)
- IV. Yahweh’s Speeches to Job (38:1—42:6)
 - First round (38:1—40:5)
 - Second round (40:6—42:6)
- V. Epilogue: The Vindication of Job (42:7-17)

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is the ponderings of a Wisdom teacher who wrestles with life's realities; what is to be gained by achieving wealth or wisdom when in the end death claims both rich and poor, wise and foolish; and how these realities relate to the fear of God. The "fear of the LORD" is the only sure foundation for building one's life (Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7). Ecclesiastes teaches that the only hope of enduring the present is to fear and obey God (12:13-14).

The word "ecclesiastes" comes from the translation of the Hebrew word 'Qohelet' in 1:1 "the words of Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem." The meaning as come to be understood as 'the leader or speaker for the assembly; teacher.' Tradition identifies Qohelet as Solomon. The 'author' of the book (whoever that may be) is giving us the words of 'the Teacher'(Solomon or another descendent of David).

The theme is clear, stated at the outset and repeated at the conclusion to form a literary envelope for the whole book: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2; 12:8 NRSV). The Hebrew term translated "vanity" has carried many connotations over the years: absurdity, frustration, futility, nonsense, emptiness, and meaningless. The core idea is that life is a 'vapor' – temporary and fleeting with much of life having no true value. The Teacher warns against a life caught in the pursuit of absurd and empty pleasures that have no lasting value. Life without God is meaningless—just pointless!

This book has been a traditionally difficult book to read because of its nature: It's often seen as rambling, negative, self-contradictory, contradictory to the rest of the message of the Bible, and it's seemingly hopeless conclusions.

Four realities dominate the overall perspective of The Teacher:

1. God is the single indisputable reality, the Creator of all and the one from whom all life comes.
2. God's ways are not always, if ever, understandable
3. On the human side, nothing really makes sense (the way things should be are not the way they are)
4. The great equalizer is death, which happens to all, and once you're dead that it!

The Teacher's own point seems to be that, even if the only real certainty about this present life is the certainty of the grave, one should still live life as a gift from God, and in such a world, joy and satisfaction are to be found in living the journey of life without trying to be in control or to "make gain" of what is merely fleeting.

By this understanding of how the book teaches wisdom, the final part of the frame, Ecclesiastes 12:13 - 14, can be seen as concluding the book with a corrective, orthodox warning:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

The Outline of Ecclesiastes

I. The Author's Introduction: Title & Theme (1:1-11)

'All Is Vanity!'

II. The Teachers Words: Wisdom Reflections (1:12-4:16)

Topics: Satisfaction, Time, Justice, and Work

III. The Teacher's Admonitions & Observations (5:1-12:8)

Topics: Religion, Politics, Wealth, Wisdom, Retribution, Destiny, Life, Youth & Age

IV. The Author's Conclusion (12:9-14)

'Fear God and Keep His Commandments!'

The Book of the Song of Songs

Introduction to Song of Songs

Song of Songs is a love poem of several episodes, celebrating the intimate love between a woman and a man. Just as Qohelet's motto "vanity of vanities" is a Hebrew superlative meaning "everything is utterly meaningless," so the expression "song of songs" means "the best song." This is the most beautiful of all songs, the best or number-one song. This song tops the charts!

Song of Songs is an elegantly stated collection of poems celebrating the love shared between young lovers created in God's image. They bask in each other's beauty and in their ability to satisfy their need for physical love. Song of Songs pays homage to the wonder and majesty of monogamous sexual love when that love is intensely pursued with honor and faithfulness.

The opening reference of the book is to "Solomon's Song of Songs," which could refer to Solomon's authorship or that the Song is written about or dedicated to Solomon. Many of the references to Solomon are in the third person, and it is more likely that the compiler of the Song was an admirer of the great king's successes and supporter of the wisdom literary traditions.

Many interpreters throughout history have been uncomfortable with the explicit material found in the book. Some, both Jewish and Christian, have taken either a typological or allegorical approach. So this book is said to illustrate God's covenant bond and intimate relationship with his people. Many Jewish interpreters have taken the Song as an allegory of the love between Yahweh and Israel, while Christian scholars have often accepted the book as praising the love between Christ and the church. But without the mention of God, it is doubtful whether any of this is the intended original message of Song of Songs.

Crucial for a good reading of the Song is to recognize that it comes to us basically in three voices: the woman, who plays the leading role throughout; the man, who especially celebrates the beauty of, and his love for, the woman; and the woman's companions, called the "daughters of Jerusalem."

The Outline of Song of Songs

1:1-6 The Lovers Presented

The woman sets the stage with her desire and delight in her lover.

1:7-2:7 First Scene: The Lovers Together

She searches for him among the shepherds and they exchange in their delight in each other with great imagery.

2:8-3:5 Second Scene: Hope, Invitation, and Dream

This scene is characterized by longing. He calls her out of hiding but is sent away at the close of the day, but she continues to seek and finds her lover.

3:6-11 Solomon's Wealth and Extravagance

4:1-5:1 Third Scene: Admiration and Invitation

The man takes the lead and describes his lover and her body using great imagery.

5:2-6:3 Fourth Scene: Dream and Search

The woman is again in the lead. In what appears to be another dream scene her lover comes and beckons her and then disappears, again she searches for him.

6:4-8:4 Fifth Scene: The Delights of Love

In this scene the man and woman both speak at length.

8:5-14 Conclusion(s): Love Strong As Death