

QUIET TIME

Theme: The poetical books in the Bible

- Try to make a specific time every day to meet Jesus Christ through reading and meditating his Word.
- Pray, talk with Jesus Christ and make a few short notes about this Bible passage in your notebook.
- Record what you discover, what speaks to your mind and heart, what you find difficult or what you understand.

Day 1^{BS} Psalm 103:1-22

A Psalm about God's benefits

Day 2 Psalm 139:1-24

God's omniscience

Day 3 Proverbs 16:1-9

God alone makes plans succeed

Day 4 Proverbs 26:4-12

What is wise?

Day 5 Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

Two are better than one

Day 6 Ecclesiastes 11:7 – 12:14

Remember your Creator before it is too late

Day 7 Song of Songs 1:1 – 2:17

A song of a lover and his beloved

Day 8 Lamentations 3:1-27

Despair and hope

Day 9 Job 1:1 – 2:13.

Job, who believes in God, is tested by Satan

Day 10 Job 40:15 – 41:14

The Maker of the hippopotamus (behemoth) and the crocodile (leviathan)

- Think about Psalm 139:23-24.
This is a possible prayer when you examine your own life.
- This week ask God to search your heart and test your anxious thoughts.
- Pray every day for someone or something specific and wait in expectation for what God is going to do (Psalm 5:3).

STUDY

Theme: The poetical books

Read study 12 carefully before the next meeting. If you have questions, write them down and mail them to one of your group leaders. We will seek an answer together.

BIBLE STUDY

Theme: A Psalm about God's benefits

If you like, you may already prepare the Bible Study for the coming meeting by reading through the Bible passage. Make use of the 5-step Bible Study method. The Bible passage is: **Psalm 103:1-22**

MEMORISATION

1. Motivation

Jesus memorized Bible verses (Luke 4:4-13). Are you doing that?

2. Memorisation

Memorise this verse in the Bible version of your choice.

THE POETICAL BOOKS

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the LORD
is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One
is understanding

Proverbs 9:10 (NIV)

3. Review and back-review

Review the last 5 memorised verses once every day and back-review all other memorised verses once every three weeks.

4. Memorisation of the Bible books

The 5 poetical books:

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs.

The 5 major prophets:

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel.

12. The poetical books

There is much poetry in the poetical books: Job (1900–500 B.C.), Psalms (1000–400 B.C.), Proverbs (971–685 B.C.), Ecclesiastes (971–333 B.C.), Song of Songs (before 874 B.C.) and Lamentations (after 586 B.C.). There is also figurative speech in the prophetic books and in the teachings of Jesus Christ and Paul.

A. Figurative speech and poetry in the Bible

1. How do you explain figurative speech?

The Bible contains much poetry and figurative speech. A thought or expression is then described in a non-literal or figurative manner. This gives it a special effect. It is important to recognise figurative speech and to explain it correctly. The Jews and even the disciples of Jesus Christ erred when they took figurative pronouncements of Jesus literally (cf. John 2:19-21; 3:3-5; 4:10-14; 4:31-34; 6:51-52; 7:33-36; 8:51-53; 11:11-14; 11:23-26; 14:4-6)! Jesus spoke about 'a temple' which the Jews would break down and which Jesus would build up again in three days. The Jews were thinking of the temple of Jerusalem, but Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body (John 2:21).

If you want to interpret figurative speech in the Bible you must reckon with the meaning of these expressions in the time they were written.

You must also study the author: his knowledge of God, his relationship to God and experience with God, his insight into himself and other people, his character, relationships, beliefs, convictions, wisdom, feelings (like amazement, indignation or fear), attitudes, motives, ambition and expectations.

And as with the other books in the Old Testament, you must discover what light the New Testament may have thrown on a passage.

Finally you must take into account what kind of figurative speech is used. Hebrew poetry consists of figurative speech, parallelisms and hyperbolic expressions.

2. Figurative speech

A metaphor compares dissimilar things with one another. E.g. "We all, *like sheep*, have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6). Lost people behave like lost sheep. Or "The LORD is my *shepherd*" (Psalm 23:1). The LORD deals with me as a shepherd does with his sheep (John 10:11-14).

A paradox combines words that seem contradictory, e.g. 'born again' (John 3:3), 'a living sacrifice' (Romans 12:1), 'the law that gives freedom' (James 1:25).

An association replaces words by something related, e.g. 'the keys of death and Hades' (Revelation 1:18). 'Keys' are symbols of authority and control.

An analogy represents something that has a corresponding characteristic. E.g. "I gave you *milk*, not *solid food*" (1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12). 'Milk' represents the first and easy Christian teachings in the Bible, while 'solid food' represents the more difficult teachings (2 Peter 3:15b-16). Also the 'types' in study 10 are examples of analogy.

An anthropomorphism ascribes a human characteristic to something, e.g. "The mountains and hills will *burst into song* before you, all the trees of the field will *clap their hands*" (Isaiah 55:12b). The creation rejoices when God's Word reaches its goal.

A pithy saying gives a sharp, mocking or exaggerated meaning to something. E.g. "*Shout louder! Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened*" (1 Kings 18:27). Or "*As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies, that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight*" (Leviticus 26:36).

An euphemism gives a hidden or softer meaning to something. E.g. "He *fell asleep*" (Acts 7:60) describes 'he died' in a more sensitive way.

3. Parallelisms

Hebrew poetry is often described in couplets of two (and sometimes three or four) lines that have correspondence of thought rather than a rhythm of sound. The second line throws more light on the first and helps to determine the author's intended meaning. Look for synonyms or antonyms, for connecting words like 'but' and 'so that', for literal words with figurative meaning and whether there is a climatic order. In Old Testament poetry this is called 'parallelism' and has four different forms:

A repetition. The second line expresses the same or a similar thought in other words, e.g. "Declare his *glory among the nations*, his *marvellous deeds among all peoples*" (Psalm 96:3).

An addition. The second line contains an added thought: the reason or the purpose, e.g. "Those who know your name will trust in you, *for you Lord*, have never forsaken those who seek you" (Psalm 9:10).

A contrast. The second line contains a contrasting or even contradicting thought, e.g. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, *but a harsh word stirs up anger*" (Proverbs 15:1).

A climax. The second line expands the effect of the first line, e.g. “*I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears*” (Psalm 34:4).

The three thoughts concerning the man who does not “walk in the counsel of the wicked”, “stand in the way of sinners” or “sit in the seat of mockers” are climatic (Psalm 1:1). Likewise, the three following results: “He delights in the law”, “meditates on the law” and “yields fruit in season” are climatic (Psalm 1:2-3).

4. Hyperbolic expressions

A hyperbolic expression is an exaggerated statement that is not intended to be understood literally, but nevertheless gives expression to deep and strong feelings. Hyperbolic language is used by Job (Job 6:26; 16:12-14), by the Psalmists in their imprecatory psalms (Psalm 10:15; 55:9; 58:6-8; 59:11-13; 69:22-28; 109:6-13; 140:9-11) and by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 10:25a; 12:3b; 17:18; 18:21-23).

The writers of the Old Testament sometimes used very strong language. Before the first coming of Christ God’s people could only see God’s righteousness when he would reward the righteous and punish the wicked (Contrast Psalm 1:1-3 with 1:4-6; contrast Psalm 5:4-6 with 5:12; contrast Proverbs 2:21 with 2:22). Out of their love for God they regarded God’s enemies as their own enemies. When they saw that wicked people fared well and gained victories, it seemed to negate God’s power, holiness and righteousness. This they could not bear (*Read* Psalm 73:2-20). That is why they begged God to keep his honour and righteousness high by bringing a shattering defeat to the godless and wicked. And that is why they expressed their feelings in violent language, like hatred (Psalm 139:21-22), revenge (Psalm 28:4-5) and even destruction (Psalm 83:1-5,13-17)!

But God is patient with the godless, because he desires to give them a chance to repent (Ezekiel 18:30-32; Luke 4:18-19; 2 Corinthians 6:2; 1 Timothy 2:1-4 and 2 Peter 3:9). God’s displeasure with sin and his patience with sinners was only really understood at the first coming of Christ when he came to show his love for sinners (Romans 3:23-26).

Moreover, he gave Christians an example how to respond to unfair treatment (1 Peter 2:21-23). He commanded Christians to love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, bless those who curse them and pray for (not against) those who ill-treat them (Luke 6:27-28)! Also the apostle Paul taught Christians not to repay evil for evil, but to leave room for God’s wrath and to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).

When we read the Old Testament we have to keep in mind that the writers in the Old Testament did not know all this yet. Therefore Christians must read the Old Testament poetry in the light of the New Testament

revelation! “Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:13).

B. The book Job

1. The suffering of Job is the result of spiritual warfare

The book of Job rejects the viewpoint that suffering is exclusively a punishment for sin. Job’s family and friends held this widespread misunderstanding about the cause of suffering. And this misunderstanding continued in Israel until the New Testament period.

The statement: ‘If someone is wicked he will suffer disaster’ is true (Isaiah 3:10-11). However the opposite statement: ‘Disaster proves that someone is wicked’ is not necessarily true (John 9:1-3)!

The book of Job helps people to see disasters and suffering from God’s point of view. That is why the book of Job begins with a glimpse behind the scenes of the events on earth to show what is taking place in the spiritual realm.

Job was a very rich man. God was full of praise about Job living a spiritual and moral good life. However, Satan argued that Job’s godliness was a refined form of selfishness. By being godly, man gained for himself security and prosperity, because God protected the godly and their possessions. Satan said that if man would not gain any advantage from being godly he would not continue to be godly anymore. Therefore Satan challenged God to withdraw his protection from Job. God would then see that Job would withdraw from God!

God knew very well that Job did not serve him to gain prosperity and wealth, but that Job served him because he was God. But because it is useless to argue with Satan, God accepted Satan’s challenge and so put his own honour at stake. The way Job would react to the disasters and sufferings in his life would affect God’s honour. God allowed Satan to cause all kinds of disasters in Job’s life, with the purpose to make God’s work visible in Job’s life (cf. John 9:3). There was one limitation: Satan was not allowed to kill Job.

After Satan had taken away all Job’s possessions, Job still did not turn against God, but remained godly! This proved that Satan’s argument was a lie (John 8:44) and God’s truth and glory was upheld.

2. God’s holy reasons for suffering

The most important message of the book of Job is that God has the unconditional right to allow people to suffer, because God has holy reasons. However, God does not always reveal these reasons.

The book of Job teaches that God is the almighty and sovereign Creator and Lord of everything and all people. In the beginning Job acknowledged God’s sovereignty. God had given Job wealth, health and children and had

then taken them away again. God had the sovereign right to do this (Job 1:21). Whoever accepts God's blessings, must also accept God's trials (Job 2:10b).

But later when Job's friends talked to him, he no longer acknowledged God's sovereignty. Instead, he called God to account why he had to suffer. One can understand this: who would not raise the question: 'Why?' when he suffers? God could have solved the problem by revealing the real holy reason for his suffering. But God did not do that. He also did not allow Job to look behind the scenes.

When God finally spoke to Job (Job chapter 38–42), he did not give Job an answer to his question: 'Why?' Instead he showed Job his majesty, power and wisdom that far surpasses man's ability to grasp. This brought Job to submit himself to God's sovereign treatment even when he had no answer to his question. Job repented that he had questioned God's action and had arrogantly called God to account (Job 42:1-6). By grace God restored Job's health, family and wealth.

Although God did not allow Job to look behind the scenes, he allows the readers of the book of Job to look behind the scenes. There was a disagreement between Satan and God. The real reason for Job's suffering was that God was revealing his sovereignty in Job's life!

The purpose of the writer is to point out the sovereignty of God. Throughout the whole book of Job we see that God has his own holy reasons and purposes with everything that happens on earth including suffering. But God does not always reveal his reasons and purposes (Isaiah 55:8-9). That is God's sovereign privilege and right! This is the most important message of the book of Job. The only correct response of man to this message is to submit and to worship! That is what Job did. And that is what we too must do.

C. The book of Ecclesiastes

1. The meaningless of things that have no eternal value

"Everything is meaningless" (empty, insignificant and perishable) (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3). The book of Ecclesiastes is a search for the meaning of life. Life is a riddle and even God's acting can be unfathomable. The preacher tries to find the key to the real significance of life. He investigates life from every angle in order to see whether there exists anything that can give satisfaction.

Significance and satisfaction cannot be found in pleasure, accomplishments and possessions (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11). This proves that it is useless to seek the meaning of life in material matters or pure human undertakings, i.e., doing anything in which God is excluded (Psalm 127:1-2). It is meaningless to toil in order to get rich. It is a chasing after the wind, because after your death you have to leave

it to someone else (Ecclesiastes 2:12-23; cf. Proverbs 23:3-4). God does everything with a view to eternity and humans cannot add to it or take away from it (Ecclesiastes 3:1-15). It is meaningless to live (without God) and then to die like an animal. A man without God can only find enjoyment in this present life, but certainly not in the life after death (Ecclesiastes 3:16-22). It is meaningless to wear yourself out in your work when you stand all alone in life, without a partner and without God (Ecclesiastes 4:4-12). It is meaningless to be religious (bring sacrifices) without listening to God. It is meaningless to make a vow to God when you don't fulfil it (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7). It is meaningless to make more money and increase wealth when you cannot enjoy them. (Because you did not share it with the needy, another will inherit it) (Ecclesiastes 5:8 – 6:12). (Without God) birth, life and laughter are meaningless, because after much sorrow man must die (Ecclesiastes 7:1-4). It is meaningless to listen to singing and laughter of fools. It is meaningless to practise extortion and bribery that only corrupts. It is meaningless to be impatient and get angry quickly. It is meaningless to think that the old days were better. And it is meaningless to try and understand the future (Ecclesiastes 7:5-14). It is meaningless to live righteous without God (Ecclesiastes 7:15-22). It is meaningless to search out wisdom and the scheme of things without God (Ecclesiastes 7:23-8:1). It is meaningless to resist the authorities and the power of death (Ecclesiastes 8:1-9). It is meaningless to try to discover why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper (without God's perspective) (Ecclesiastes 8:10-17). It is meaningless to try and escape death (Ecclesiastes 9:1-12). However, it is not the purpose of the writer to describe life on earth as something negative.

The book concentrates on the meaningless of life and working and wearing oneself out when all these things are done *without God* (cf. Romans 8:20). Nevertheless, wisdom is better than folly: calmness lays great errors to rest; appoint only wise people to high positions; never dig a pit for another to fall into; sharpened skills bring success; it is wise to speak graciously and limit your words (cf. Proverbs 10:19); diligence keeps your house dry in rainstorms; and never speak evil of people behind their backs (Ecclesiastes 10:1-20).

2. The meaning of things that have eternal value

The practical conclusion of the book of Ecclesiastes is that man has been called to invest with a view to the future and to do his work with diligence (Ecclesiastes 11:1-6). God expects man to prepare himself with a view to the future life (Ecclesiastes 11:7 – 12:7).

The preacher discovered that only the God of the Bible has the key that reveals the real meaning of life and how one can experience genuine satisfaction! He says, "Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For

God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

The purpose of the writer is to point out the meaningless of everything that has no eternal value, in order to bring man to look at all things from God’s point of view (cf. Psalm 73:16-17) and to seek and to find the things that do have eternal value (cf. Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:21; 2 Corinthians 4:18; 5:7)

In this sense the book of Ecclesiastes is a part of the gospel that Christians must proclaim in the world. The heart of man longs for that things that give lasting satisfaction.

But only when man begins to see the meaningless and lack of value of their earthly toil and possessions, they will seek what has eternal value and significance. Only Jesus Christ is the Giver of eternal and imperishable life and lasting satisfaction to the human heart (John 10:10)! Only what Christians do with Christ and for Christ has eternal value (Psalm 16:8; 36:10; Matthew 25:40; Romans 11:36). So, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17). “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord” (Colossians 3:23).